Research on Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2224-5766 (Paper) ISSN 2225-0484 (Online)
Vol.7, No.20, 2017

Observation Research: A Methodological Discourse in Communication Research

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Abstract
Qualitative observation as a research technique has not been very popular among most mass communication researchers in Africa and other developing countries. This explains why there are few studies based on this technique among scholars from this region. Against this background, this expository paper explains the concept of observation research method; distinguishes qualitative from other types of observation research; explains the distinguishing characteristics of participant and non-participant observation, the key questions that guide observation research as well as the procedure for conducting observation research. Furthermore, it explains the various approaches to interpreting data obtained from observation research. The major conclusion brawn from this study is that the ability of the researcher to utilize this technique depends on this capacity to identify appropriate research problems that are better investigated through this research technique.
Keywords: Observation, Research, Qualitative, Participant and Non Participant.

1. Introduction

The scientific approach to learning emphasizes truth being found through a series of objective and verifiable analysis. In other words, it approaches learning as a series of procedures which lead to the discovery of fact. This implies that the scientific method is self-correcting in that changes in knowledge are appropriate when errors in previous knowledge are corrected.

.There are usually two sides to the scientific method of knowing-theory and research. According to Tichenor and McLeod (1970), cited in Esiri (2012), a theory is a tentative explanation formulated to assist scientists in understanding some small or large parts of the reality around them. Theories arise mostly from observation often systematic, sometimes casual and occasionally accidental.

Research in common parlance refers to search for knowledge; a voyage of discovery. It is also fact-finding and knowledge that can be explained or verified through some procedure. The *Chambers Dictionary* (2009) defines research as "careful search; investigation; systematic investigation towards increasing the sum of knowledge." According to Selltz, Wrightsman and Cook (1976) cited in Ajala(1996) "to research is to search again, to take more careful look, to find out more." Asika(1989) cited in Okafor (2000:171) defines research as "the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data," He further adds that research is oriented towards the discovery of the relationship that exists among phenomena of the world in which we live.

Social science or behavioural research can be classified into two broad categories-(i) quantitative and (ii) qualitative. Quantitative research is often descriptive, concerned with numerical data and measurement while qualitative research is interpretative, probes attitudes and feelings.. Quantitative research includes experimentation, survey, content analysis among others. Qualitative research includes in-depth interview, focus group discussion (FGD), ethnography, historical research, case study, observation among others.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Observation research is that which is based on things seen. According to the Atlas website (2016) qualitative observational research is a type of correlational (non-experimental) research in which a researcher observes ongoing behaviour. It further adds that it is a social research technique that involves direct and indirect watching of phenomena in their natural settings.

Similarly, St John's University of Tanzania's website (2017) explains that observational research involves watching or viewing behaviour and systematically recording the results of those observations. Bryant (2015) explains that qualitative observation is a method of data collection in which a researcher observes phenomenon within a specific research field. In a similar vein, Wimmer and Dominick (2011) explain that observational research involves the planned watching, recording and analysis of observed behaviour as it occurs in a natural setting. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation website (2016) further adds that observational research is a systematic data collection approach in which researchers use all their senses to examine people in natural settings or naturally occurring situations.

This qualitative research method involves studying people, things or situations by watching or viewing them in their natural settings It is used to seek answers to questions that questionnaires and direct reports may

not be able to provide answers to. Observational research is more concerned with description and explanation than with quantitative measurements. Like other research methods, observational research is conducted to generate all important data upon which to base any conclusions. For example, a researcher may decide to investigate the news processing behaviour of journalists by observing them (journalists) right in the newsroom where they work.

Observation as a research method has a long history in Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology. Its early use in the social sciences was in these disciplines. It has also been utilized in Mass Communication research particularly in gatekeeping studies.

2.1 Distinction Between Qualitative And Other Types Of Observation

It is important to state that observation as a qualitative research technique is different from everyday observation which is often casual, selective and inaccurate. The former (scientific observation) is focused on what the researcher wants to investigate and it is objective as well as systematic (Berger 2010). St John's University of Tanzania's website (2017) adds that observation as a qualitative research method is guided by research questions; conscious and planned, systematically recorded, often using an observation checklist, data are analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods.

It is also important to explain that qualitative observation is different from that utilized in the natural or physical sciences. In the latter type of observation, there is a deliberate attempt by the researcher to manipulate variables in order to establish cause and effect. Furthermore, qualitative observation is often used with other research methods such as survey, experimentation, focus group discussion, case study, ethnography among others. Indeed, case study and ethnography are regarded as special types of qualitative observation.

2.2 Types of Qualitative Observation Research

Researchers usually distinguish between two types of qualitative observational research: participant and non-participant. According to the Atlas website (2016) the distinguishing factor between both types is the extent to which a researcher intrudes upon or controls the environment. Sobowale (2008) adds that each type involves the ability of the researcher not only to observe events as they occur but also his ability to nose for details that others may take for granted

However, it should be noted that choice of technique (participant or non-participant) depends on the research problem, the degree of cooperation from the group or individuals being observed and ethical consideration. Similarly, participant and non-participant observation techniques can complement each other and can be used together.

2.3 Participant Observation

According to Sobowale (2008), participant observation also referred to as 'field research' is an intensive and more involved way of gathering information through observation. Berger (2010) defines it as a qualitative research technique that provides the opportunity to study people in real life situations. The Atlas website (2016) explains that participant observation research involves a researcher inserting himself as a member of a group being studied with the aim of observing behaviour that otherwise would not be accessible. It further explains that in this research strategy behaviour remains relatively natural thereby giving it high external validity. Similarly, Faterman (1998) cited in Robert Wood Johnson Foundation website (2016) adds that participant observation combines participation in the lives of the people being studied with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data. In this type of research, observation is carried out in real setting and there is the absence of the kind of control and structure present in experimental research. In participant observation, the researcher becomes involved in a group, organization or entity that is being studied.

2.4 Techniques of Participant Observation

These are several techniques of participant observation which are also equivalent to the roles of the researcher in the observation process. According to Berger (2010) these are *participant as observer* and *observer as participant*. Participant as observer refers to where the researcher participates with the group being observed and is a functioning part of the group. Accordingly the researcher is an 'insider' enjoying a close understanding of the context and the process while performing the added role of an observer and recorder. Sobowale (2008) refers to this as *active participant observation*. In observer as participant, the researcher is a neutral outsider who has been given the privilege of participating in the activity for the purpose of making observations and recording them. Sobowale calls this *overt participant observation*.

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) posit that there are four techniques of participant observation which are *overt observation, overt participation, covert observation* and *covert participation*. In overt observation, the researcher is identified and those under observation are aware that they are being observed. In overt participation, those being observed also know the researcher. However, he goes beyond the observer role and becomes a

participant in the activity.

In covert observation, the researcher's role is limited to that of an observer but those under observation are not aware that they are being studied. Covert participation involves the researcher taking part in the process under investigation but is not identified as a researcher.

In addition to the above, Sobowale (2008) identifies "o*bserver as pretender"* model which is also referred to as *covert observation*. Here, the individuals being studied do not know they are part of a research project. This is to ensure that the subjects behave in a natural manner. In this case, the researcher "pretends" to be an ordinary group member.

Sobowale explains that the active participant observer is a member of the group he is trying to observe. He normally seeks the membership of the group and when accepted, he accepts the norms of the group and obeys its rules and regulations. He warns that the participant observer must be careful not to give himself away. Once other members of the group get to know that he has an ulterior motive for joining the group, they may become hostile towards him. They may even attack him physically or keep away from him and prevent him from knowing the goings-on in the group. This is why it is said that participant observation can be a risky form of research. Participant observation is particularly useful to investigative journalists, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists interested in obtaining first-hand information about groups, communities and individuals..

2.5 Advantages of Participant Observation

Participant observation has several advantages which include the following:

i. It enables the researcher to gain an insider's knowledge of a group or situation.
ii. It helps the researcher to understand what is going on in the setting that he is studying.
iii. It helps the researcher to determine which questions to ask.
iv. It is an unobtrusive way of obtaining information about groups and their behaviour.
v. It fosters an in-depth and rich understanding of a phenomenon, situation and/or setting and the behaviour of the participants in that setting.
vi. It is an essential way of gaining an understanding of naturalistic setting and its members' behaviour.
vii. It provides the foundation for theory and hypotheses development.

2.6 *Disadvantages of Participant Observation*

Participant observation, however, has the following disadvantages:

i. The researcher stands the risk of internalizing the values of the group to the extent that he may forget why he is there. This is also referred to as *observer effect*.
ii. Due to the need for the researcher to conceal his identity, he cannot freely record his observations.
iii. Its results may be affected by the subjective nature of the observation and the recording process. According to the selective perception theory, people see what they want to see and choose what they want to see from available acitivities.
iv. Sometimes the researcher goes beyond recording what people do and assumes he can read people's minds and imagine why people are doing certain things. Berger (2010) calls this "the problem of mind reading."

2.7 Non-participant Observation

Non participant observation also referred to as naturalistic or direct observation involves the researcher carefully watching participants or phenomena without actively participating in the activity being observed (Maitlis and Liu, 2010). Williams (2014) defines it as a relatively unobtrusive qualitative research design for gathering primary data about some aspects of the social world without interacting directly with its participants. He further adds that the non-participant observer sometimes is physically present with the research participants in a naturalistic setting but at other times he may not be present tn the setting.

The Atlas website (2016) explains that in non-participant observation, the researcher simply studies behaviour that occurs naturally in a non-artificial context. This is much unlike experimental observation that takes place in a controlled laboratory setting where variables are deliberately manipulated. In a similar vein, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation website (2016) posits that in non-participant observation, the researcher has limited interaction with the people being observed. It adds that unlike participant observation, this approach may present limited insight into the meaning of the social context being studied.

According to Sobowale (2008) in non-participant observation, the researcher detaches himself from the event he is watching. He makes his observation from a distance. He is not involved or engaged in the activity as his participant observation counterpart. The participant observer watches a situation from a detached position which does not intrude or take over any of the roles of the people interacting in the situation being studied. For instance, a researcher who wishes to study the behavior of a traffic policeman at a road block does not have to join the police force to do that. He may stand at a convenient distance from the check point and watch the

interactions of the policeman with motorists and other road users. He is far less inhibited to jot down his observations.

2.8 Advantages of Non-participant Observation

Non participant observation has several advantages which include the following:

i. There is no risk of "observer effect" or the researcher internalizing the values of the group he is observing.
ii. It may result in detailed recording of information.
iii. It can provide the basis for theory and hypotheses development.
iv. It is less risky than participant observation.

2.9 Disadvantages of Non-participant Observation

The following are some of the disadvantages of non-participant observation

i. Since the observer is detached from the situation, he relies on his perception which may be inaccurate.
ii. If the research subjects know that they are being observed, the results obtained may be distorted as they may not reflect their actual behavioural patterns.
iii. It has the problem of bias. The observer is bound to be subjective in the aspects of the event he chooses to watch and the details he records.
iv. It is more prone to errors than participant observation.

2.10 Key Questions That Guide Observation Research

It has been pointed out that the observational research strategy is different from non-scientific observation in several ways. The most important, however, is that it is conscious and planned. Indeed to ensure validity, it is recommended that the researcher should have a well-planned checklist which includes the specific behavior to be observed and time for the observation. Furthermore, the researcher should use research assistants and test for the differences between them in terms of the records of their observation

For the above reasons, there are some key questions that guide observational research.

1. What should be the role of the observer? For instance is he going to be a participant or non-participant observer? Which variant of either method is he going to adopt? This must clearly be indicated in the application for ethical approval to conduct the research.
2. Who are the subjects to be observed? In this regard, the researcher must indicate the roles of the persons to be observed.
3. What will the researcher be observing? This implies that the researcher should indicate the specific features of the persons or behaviour that will be observed.
4. What are the actions to be observed? This means that the researcher must define the unit of observation which might be explained in terms of specific actions or interaction.
5. Repetition of observations. Will the researcher rely on one set of observation or repeated sets of observations? Those have to be clearly spelt out.
6. How will the researcher record the observations? Will they be recorded on paper, audio or video recordings?
7. How will the data be analyzed? The researcher should indicate whether the data will be analyzed utilizing quantitative or qualitative methods.

3. Procedure of Observation Research

Observational research is useful for collecting data and for generating hypotheses and theories. As already indicated, it is more concerned with description and explanation than with measurement and quantification. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2011) there are at least six stages in observational research procedure. These are: (1) choosing the research site, (2) gaining access, (3) sampling (4) collecting data, (5) analyzing data, and (6) exiting.

3.1 Choosing The Research Site

The nature of the research or study usually suggests a behaviour or phenomenon of interest. Once this has identified, the next step is to choose a setting where the behaviour or phenomenon occurs with sufficient frequency to make observation worthwhile. The site must be stable to permit observations over a period of time. For example, if a researcher is interested in studying journalists' information processing behaviour, the best site is a newspaper, radio or television newsroom.

3.2 Gaining Access

Once the researcher has selected the site, the next step is to gain access to the site. The easiest site to enter is

usually the one that is open to the public and gives people little reason to keep behaviour secret.

3.3 Sampling

On gaining access to the site, the researcher will have to select a subset of the site's subjects he is interested in. If the topic is family viewing of television, how many families should be included or sampled for the study? After answering this question the researcher will now sample behaviour episodes or segments. It is noteworthy that the researcher cannot be everywhere and see everything. Therefore, what he has observed becomes *de facto* sample of what he has not observed. For instance, if a researcher is watching a meeting in the newsroom, this activity represents other unobserved meetings. Most field observations use purposive sampling, where observers draw on their knowledge of subjects under study and sample only from the relevant behaviours and events.

3.3 Collecting Data

At this stage, the data for study are collected. Data collection tools in observation research include: (1) note book and pencil (2) video recorder and (3) audio recorder.

In addition to firsthand observation (i.e. being on the scene), three other data collection techniques are available to field researchers: diary keeping, unobtrusive measure, and document analysis. With the first technique, an investigator routinely supplements his or her field notes by keeping a research diary. The second helps overcome problem of reactivity by searching out nationally occurring phenomena relevant to the research task. The people who provide data through unobtrusive measurement are unaware that they are providing information for a research project. The third has to do with looking at the content of documents such as newspaper stories, transcript of TV shows, and so on.

3.4 Analyzing Data

The overall goal of data analysis in field observation is to arrive at general understanding of the phenomenon under study. Here, data analysis consists of primarily filing the information and analyzing its content. Constructing the filing system is an important step in observation. The purpose of the filing system is to arrange raw field data in an orderly format that is amenable to systematic retrieval later.

3.5 Exiting

As a researcher you must have a plan for leaving the setting or the group under study. In some instances, the group may have become dependent on the researcher in some way, and the departure may have a negative effect on the group as a whole. The researcher has an ethical obligation therefore to do everything possible to prevent psychological, emotional, or physical injury to those being studied. Consequently, leaving the scene must be handled with diplomacy and tact.

3.6 Interpretation of Observation Research

There are three approaches the researcher can adopt in interpreting data obtained from observational research. These are: (1) descriptive (2) inferential and (3) evaluation.

Descriptive observational variables require no inference making on the part of the researcher. He observes things and write them down. Inferential observational variables require the researcher to make inferences about what is observed and underlying emotion. For example, the researcher may observe a journalist in the newsroom frowning. From this observation he may assume (correctly) that he or she is not happy with his job.

Evaluative observational variables require the researcher to make an inference and a judgment from the observed behaviour. For example, a researcher may want to investigate whether there is a relationship between the frowning journalist and job satisfaction. It is noteworthy however to explain that when writing field notes, the researcher should include descriptive as well as inferential data. It is also important to describe the setting and the mood in a detailed manner. All such things that may change behaviour need to be noted.

4.0 Conclusion

Observation research is an invaluable qualitative method utilized in communication research. It is used to answer questions that quantitative research techniques may not effectively provide answers to. However, the ability of the researcher to use it depends on his capacity to recognize appropriate research problems that are better investigated through this technique and adherence to its procedure so that reliable data can be obtained.

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