
UNIT 5 OBSERVATION, INTERVIEW AND CASE STUDY METHOD*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Observation
 - 5.2.1 Types of Observation
 - 5.2.2 Advantages of Observation
 - 5.2.3 Limitations of Observation
- 5.3 Interview
 - 5.3.1 Types of Interview
 - 5.3.2 Advantages of Interview
 - 5.3.3 Limitations of Interview
- 5.4 Case Study
 - 5.4.1 Characteristics of Case Study
 - 5.4.2 Advantages of Case Study
 - 5.4.3 Limitations of Case Study
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 References
- 5.7 Key Words
- 5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 5.9 Unit End Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to,

- describe observation, its types, advantages and limitations.
- discuss interview, its types, advantages and limitations.
- explain case study, its characteristics, advantages and limitations.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Sahil was pursuing his post graduation in psychology and as a part of an assignment in developmental psychology, he wanted to understand the way toddlers interact and communicate with each other during play time. Instead of interviewing the parents/ guardians or teachers, he felt that observing the toddlers in their naturalistic set up would provide him with accurate and first hand information.

Sheela was a research associate and wanted to study the health related beliefs of fisher folks in her state. She choose interview method as she felt that this method will help her gather more information about the health related beliefs of the fisher folks.

* Prof. Suhas Shetgovekar, Faculty, Discipline of Psychology, SOSS, IGNOU, New Delhi

Suzan was a clinical psychologist and as a part of certain project she had to study the effect of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy on individuals with Depression. She used case study approach in order to study the participants as she felt that this method will provide her an opportunity to seek in-depth information.

As we can see in the above three examples, three different methods of data collection have been mentioned, namely, observation, interview and case study. All the three methods can be adequately used to collect in-depth information from the participants. As students of psychology, it is important that we understand these methods as that will help us make decisions about which methods to use when we carry out research.

In the present unit, thus, we will discuss these three methods and in the next unit, we will discuss about psychological tests, that are used by researchers to collect data from the participants.

5.2 OBSERVATION

We know that young children learn a lot through observation and as adults as well we indulge in observation. We observe people, events, phenomenon etc. and then make interpretations about the same. The observation that we will discuss in this section is similar, though, it is more systematic in nature and is carried out keeping in mind the objective(s) of a research.

Observation can be described as a process of data collection in which the units/ events/ phenomena/ individuals witnessed first hand. A researcher, for example, can observe employees at work, children interacting with each other, people belonging to certain community and so on. This is one of the prominent methods that is used to collect data in qualitative research. According to Kerlinger (1995), there are two modes with regard to observation. One is where we directly observe persons as they behave or events (for example, employees working in this work set up) and the other is where we seek information from persons about their or others' behaviour by asking questions (for example, parent can be asked about their child's behaviour at home).

Observation can be carried out either in a naturalistic set up or it can be carried out in a laboratory or a clinical set up. The benefits of naturalistic situation are in a way high as the behaviour of individuals in their natural set up can be studied. In such a case there is no manipulation or control of any variables. For example, individuals can be observed in shopping centres and malls or at a railway station. Even animals can be observed using naturalistic observation.

Though, when a researcher needs to manipulate an independent variable or needs to control effect of certain extraneous variable(s) then observation can be carried out in an artificial situation like a laboratory. This can also be done using one way mirror. To take an example, behaviour of children during play time can be studied in presence and absence of an adult.

Observer plays an immensely important role in observation as he/ she needs to observe and record events and details.

Various aids can be used to carry out observation, that includes the following:

Checklist: Very often based on the domain of observation, a checklist is created that can then be used while carrying out observation. This can be termed as a

tool for structured observation (discussed later in this section). Such a checklist could include demographic as well as behavioural items/ statements.

Ratings scales: Rating scales can also be used during observation. These scales are more specific compared to checklist. These scales include lesser dimensions and are also comparatively well defined. Thus, statement and items will be marked based on a rating scale.

Video recordings: Observations can also be video recorded so that they can be referred to later on. Such recordings will ensure that no information is missed out by the researcher/ observer. Though, prior permission needs to be taken from the participants with assurance of confidentiality. In which case spontaneity can get affected and social desirability may also occur on the part of the participants.

Besides the above, observers may also use one way mirror, where the observer can see the participants, but the participants cannot see the observer. Television cameras could also be used, where a camera is placed in the room where the individuals are interacting or where the event is taking place and the observer can observe the individuals/ events, through a television, sitting in another room.

5.2.1 Types of Observation

There are various types of observation, these are discussed as follows:

- 1) **Participant observation:** As the name suggests, in participant observation, the observer participates along with other participants in the activities/events/ phenomena being studied so that he/ she is able to gather first hand information and interpret it effectively. Thus, the researcher is actively involved in activities carried out by the participants. This type of observation is often used by social anthropologist and can be used to study tribal groups (Majumdar, 2015). To take an example, if the researcher is studying rituals and practices of certain community during a festival, then he/ she will actively participate in the same. As the researcher is actively involved he/ she is able to gather relevant information about the day to day activities, rituals, practices etc. of the community/ group. Though, seeking entry to the group could pose a challenge besides creating rapport with the community/ group. Some of the advantages of this method include opportunity to observe the behavior of the individuals in a natural set up, and opportunity to built rapport and closeness with the community/ group members that enables the researcher to collect in-depth information and develop deeper understanding. Further, as the researcher is actually participating, he/ she gets an original perspective about the events, phenomena, rituals etc. To mention some of the disadvantages, this method could be very time consuming. Also exiting the community/ group could be a challenge as the researcher forms a bond with the participants. Another disadvantage of this type is that if the participants are aware about the observer then their behaviour and interaction may get affected as they may not be spontaneous. Though, to deal with this, deception can be used where the participants are not aware that they are being studied. But this can give rise to certain ethical issues and due care needs to be taken to protect the privacy and rights of the participants. The researcher also needs to be careful in noting down the observations and interpreting them. These need to be done as objectively as possible to avoid any bias and subjective interpretations. Also the researcher needs to be adequately trained

and skilled to carry out effective observations. He/ she also needs to carry out a background study about the community/ group so that he/ she is able to study the events, phenomena, practices etc. from right perspective.

- 2) **Non-participant observation:** Though, a lot of first hand information can be gathered with the help of participant observation, this type of observation has numerous challenges and problems. One way to deal with these challenges and problems would be by employing non-participant observation. In this the researcher/ observer will not participate along with the participants in the activities/ events/ phenomena being studied. Thus, the observer will observe the participants passively. An example of non-participant observation would be observing children's interaction during playtime using a one way mirror or television camera. Some of the advantages of this type include, objectivity and ability to be neutral. As the researcher is not participating, his/her perspective and interpretation can be more objective (also because he/ she may not be emotionally involved, which can happen in participatory observation). Thus, his/ her views would not be biased or subjective. The researcher is also more likely to be impartial as compared to participant observation. The participants may also share more information as they may not mind sharing the same with a stranger rather than a person who is familiar (as in case of participant observation). There are disadvantages to this method as well. Though there is greater objectivity compared to the participant observation, subjectivity on the part of observer / researcher cannot be ruled out as he/ she will ultimately interpret the behaviour based what what he/ she sees and perceives. He/ she may also not be in position to ask any questions to seek clarification. Also the observation is not complete as the interaction/ behaviour is observed during certain time period and the researcher will observe behavior/ event that is happening in front of him/ her at that moment. The set up is artificial and the participant are mostly aware that they are being observed, thus, the spontaneity can get affected and social desirability can also creep in.
- 3) **Structured observation:** Structured observation is denoted by “ a careful definition of units to be observed, a clear delineation as to what a person or group to be the object of observation, what information constitutes the domain of observation, the size of the group and the selection principle thereof, the standardised conditions of observation” (Majumdar, 2015, page. 226). From this definition it is clear that the researcher/ observer has clear guidelines about what to observe. This in a way is helpful as the observer is prepared and knows what exactly, he/ she needs to observe. This type adequately guides the observation process though it is not as flexible as unstructured observation.
- 4) **Unstructured observation:** In this observation, the guidelines and principles as stated under structured observation are not available. Though the structured observation could be more systematic, unstructured observation provides a kind of freedom to observe the units/ events/ individuals/ phenomena and so on without the pressure of any conceptual guidelines or framework (Majumdar, 2015). It also needs to be noted that more often than not, an observation is semi structured, that is a combination of structured and unstructured observation is employed.

5.2.2 Advantages of Observation

The following are some of the advantages of observation:

- 1) This is one of the best methods of obtaining data in a naturalistic setup.
- 2) It is helpful when participants are not in position to adequately/ verbally answer the questions. For example, young children may not be able to answer certain questions.
- 3) First hand information can be obtained as methods like interview and so on may not be as reliable as observation.
- 4) When a method like interview is used, the individuals may not reveal all the information, but with the help of observation much more information can be obtained.
- 5) It can help in verification of information provided by the participants.

5.2.3 Limitations of Observation

The following are some of the limitations of observation:

- 1) Subjectivity can creep in during data collection and interpretation.
- 2) The characteristics of the observer like his / her attitudes, beliefs and even past experiences can have an impact on his/ her perception of the individuals/ events/ phenomena and so on.
- 3) The researcher may end up with vast information and may not be able to interpret it adequately.
- 4) The observation is in the present context and no information about past can be collected without using certain methods like interview.
- 5) Yet another problem is related to the validity and reliability of observation. According to Kerlinger (1995, page 488), “the interpretive burden that the researcher is subjected to could lead to lower validity. Further, reliability is also significant in this context. Reliability here is denoted by ‘agreement amongst the observers’”. Thus, using videotapes and records can help achieve a higher reliability, though if such an agreement is due to chance, for example, then the reliability may suffer.

Observation is thus an effective method of data collection, but we need to remember that the researcher needs to be not only skilled and sensitive but also possess necessary expertise. He/ she also needs to be cautious and keep in mind the ethical issues while carrying out observation so that the rights of the participants are protected and they are not subjected to any harm.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) What is observation?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) List the types of observation.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3) State any one advantage and one limitation of observation.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

5.3 INTERVIEW

This is one of the most commonly used methods of data collection. Various methods of data collection can be categorised based the extent to which they are direct. For instance, one way data can be collected is by asking questions to the participants and another way would be by using projective techniques like Rorschach inkblot series and so on. Interview can be termed as a direct method that may help in gathering relevant information directly from the participants. Though, it is possible that the participants are not able to or not willing to reveal certain information. In which case a direct method like interview will not work. Kerlinger (1995, page 441) described interview as “a face to face interpersonal role situation in which one person, the interviewer, asks a person being interviewed, the respondent, questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to research problem”. The key points in this definition are that there are two main individuals involved, interviewer and interviewee who are involved in a face to face interaction. And during this interaction, the interviewer will ask certain questions to the interviewee to elicit responses.

One of the main aspects of the interview is the interview schedule. Interview schedule is nothing but questions that the interviewer has to ask as well as certain guidelines with regard to how the interviewer is expected to proceed with the interview. Preparing an interview schedule is a challenge and a lot of planning and work is required. While preparing an interview schedule one needs to be sure that the sentences are specific and clear and lack words with double meaning or ambiguous words. Though interview schedules are costly and are time consuming affair, the amount of information that can be obtained with the help of interview schedule is large.

Before preparing an interview schedule suitable background information needs to be collected about the focus of research and research problem. An interview schedule will mainly constitute ‘identification information or face sheet, census type information and problem information’ (Kerlinger, 1995, page 441). Identification information is mainly required so as to be able to identify the schedule. The census type information is related to the socio demographic information including age, gender, education, occupation, marital status, socio-

economic status and so on and the problem information includes questions pertaining to the research problem for which the responses from the interviewee are elicited. The items in the interview schedule could be open ended or close ended. In open ended items, a frame is provided for the answer but otherwise the interviewee has freedom to answer the way he/ she wants to. In close ended items certain fixed alternatives are provided from which the interviewee has to select, thus, limiting the flexibility of answers. In certain cases, scales are also used in interview schedule where responses can be provided in terms of degree of agreement or disagreement. For example, agree, undecided, disagree or frequently, sometimes, rarely, never. The researcher or the interviewer needs to carefully decide about what type of items he/ she wants in his/ her interview schedule based on the research problem. While carrying out interview, audio and video recording can be carried out with due permission of the interviewee(s).

Care needs to be taken while framing the questions and the following needs to be ensured:

- The question is with focuses on the research problem.
- It is not vague and lacks any ambiguity.
- A question needs to elicit an answer and should not elicit a question.
- Background information needs to be obtained about the study so that the researcher or interviewer is sure that the respondents will have answers to questions asked and also to ensure that the possibility of resistance to the question on part of the interviewees will be low or negligible.
- A question that may elicit a response that is influenced by social desirability needs to be avoided.

5.3.1 Types of Interview

Interview can be categorised as follows:

- 1) **Structured Interview:** This is also referred to as standardised interview. This type is standardised, as the name suggests and includes predefined questions that are sequenced in certain predefined order and also worded in certain way. Thus, there is not much freedom to the interviewer to make any changes to the questions asked. The interview schedules for such an interview are prepared carefully well in advance and with much deliberations. And it is prepared with a focus on the research problem. Though one disadvantage could be that preparing such an interview schedule is an exhaustive and time consuming process and there is not much scope for the researcher to make many modifications.
- 2) **Unstructured Interview:** Also termed as unstandardised interview, this type of interview is more flexible and as such questions are not predetermined and the interviewer has full freedom to ask the questions in the way and sequence that he/ she wants to. This in a way provides the necessary freedom to the interviewer to make any modifications as per the demand of the situation.
- 3) **Semistructured interview:** Such an interview is a combination of structured and unstructured interview. There will be an interview schedule that is predetermined, but the interviewer has full freedom to modify and make changes in it.

5.3.2 Advantages of Interview

- 1) A lot of relevant, in-depth and a large amount of information can be collected with the help of this method.
- 2) This method is suitable to collect data regarding certain serious and complex issues (that could even evoke emotional reactions).
- 3) This method is flexible and can be used with varied respondents from varied backgrounds.
- 4) Since it is face to face, the interviewer also has an advantage of observing the non verbal behaviour of the interviewee. Certain spontaneous reactions of the interviewee can also be recorded.
- 5) It is possible for the interviewer to explain certain questions or words to the interviewee or clarify any doubts, thus increasing the likelihood of eliciting appropriate responses.
- 6) Certain participants may display resistance in replying, but with suitable skills and rapport it is possible for interviewer to elicit responses from such participants.
- 7) It is comparatively easy for the interviewer to notice if the interviewee is faking or providing genuine responses.

5.3.3 Limitations of Interview

- 1) Preparing a suitable and adequate interview schedule is a task in itself and not only hard work and time but certain level of expertise and skills are also required.
- 2) Even interviewing requires necessary expertise and skills.
- 3) It is time consuming and is not cost effective.
- 4) It may be difficult to analyse and interpret the responses to the open ended questions.
- 5) Subjectivity may creep in.
- 6) Reliability and validity could be low.
- 7) Influence of social desirability cannot be ruled out.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) What is structured interview?
.....
.....
.....
- 2) State any one limitation of interview method.
.....
.....
.....

5.4 CASE STUDY

Case study can be described as an approach that helps in obtaining information about the unit from varied perspectives. Case study thus helps obtain in-depth information about the unit. Case study can be used to study not only individuals, but organisations/ institutions, events and so on. Often multiple methods of data collection including interview and observation are used in case study to collect information about the unit. In psychology, case study is frequently used in varied setups including clinical setup, research and so on. Case study can be termed as exploratory in nature where, in-depth data is collected from the unit/ participant using multiple methods of data collection. With the help of case study method, it is possible to gather relevant and large amount of data about the unit. And based on this information certain hypothesis(es) can be formulated for further research. Also certain unique cases, events, phenomenon and so on can be thoroughly studied with the help of this method.

Most frequently used methods of data collection in case study include interviews, observation, referring to letters, notes and diaries of the participant and any other related documents. It is mainly a qualitative approach and the data obtained by the researcher is qualitatively analysed.

When a case study is used in a research, it is important to first of all identify the focus of research, which in turn will guide the way the case (unit/ event/ phenomenon etc.) is to be studied by the researcher. In this regard suitable research questions can be formulated so that there is clarity in the problem and objectives of the study. Also it is important to review the literature in this regard so that the researcher has adequate background knowledge (though this is true with any research). The case study is necessarily complex as any unit will have numerous dimensions like personal, social, economical, political and so on. Once the focus of the case study is clear, then the methods of data collection can be finalised. As stated earlier, varied methods of data collection can be used in case study. But which methods are to be used will depend on the research questions and the research problem and objectives. The researcher will also need to decide about whether a single case will be taken or a small sample. This again will be determined by the research problem and objectives. Once the data is collected, the researcher can start organising and analysing it and while doing so the research questions and focus need to be kept in mind. Otherwise the main focus of the research can get lost in the large and in-depth amount of information gathered with the help of case study. Once the data is analysed, the researcher can then focus on preparation of report with interpretations, evidence and conclusions.

Thus, case study method can be effectively used in order to study certain units/ events/phenomena etc.

5.4.1 Characteristics of Case Study

Some of the significant features of case study method are:

- A single unit or a small sample is studied under case study.
- It is in-depth, thorough and comprehensive study of the unit, be it an individual, event, organisation/ institution etc.
- It can be termed as a direct approach.

- Case study also focuses on reciprocal inter-relationship of the variables and factors.
- It can be termed as an exploratory and descriptive in the way the information obtained about the unit is analysed.
- The unit that is studied is perceived as a whole.
- The unit is studied from various perspectives.
- Multiple methods of data collection are used to study the unit.
- The unit that is selected for study is often studied for a long period of time (though in certain cases a limited time period is specified) using varied methods so as to obtain necessary information that will enable researcher to make interpretations and draw conclusions.

5.4.2 Advantages of Case Study

- 1) It can be effectively used to not only develop a new theory but also challenge or modify an existing theory.
- 2) In-depth and exhaustive information about the unit can be collected.
- 3) It provides idea for further research.
- 4) Certain unique cases, events and phenomenon can be studied in detail with help of this method.
- 5) The information collected can not only be used to formulate certain hypothesis(es) but it can also be used in order to develop schedules and questionnaires.
- 6) It is possible to use multiple methods of data collection as per the need of the situation.

5.4.3 Limitations of Case Study

- 1) The results obtained cannot be generalised.
- 2) It is time consuming and also certain level of expertise and skills are required on part of the researcher. It is also not cost effective.
- 3) Subjectivity can creep in during interpretation of data.
- 4) Replication may not be possible.
- 5) It is possible that the participant may provide responses the way it is sought by the researcher.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) List any one feature of case study.
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2) State any one advantage of case study.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

5.5 LET US SUM UP

To summarise, in the present unit we discussed about the three main methods, namely, observation, interview and case study. Observation can be described as a process of data collection in which the units/ events/ phenomena/ individuals are witnessed first hand. There are two modes with regard to observation. One is where we directly observe persons as they behave or events (for example, employees working in this work set up) and the other is where we seek information from persons about their or others behaviour by asking questions (for example, parent can be asked about their child's behaviour at home). Observation can be carried out either in a naturalistic set up or it can be carried out in a laboratory or a clinical set up. While carrying out observation, various aids like checklist, rating scales, video recordings, one way mirror and so on can also be used. The types of observation, including participant observation, non participant observation, structured observation and unstructured observation were also discussed in the present unit, besides the advantages and limitations of observation. The next method discussed was interview, which is one of the most commonly used methods of data collection. It can be described as a face to face interpersonal role situation in which one person, the interviewer, asks a person being interviewed, the respondent, questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to research problem. One of the main aspects of the interview is the interview schedule. Interview schedule is nothing but questions that the interviewer has to ask as well as certain guidelines with regard to how the interviewer is expected to proceed with the interview. Preparing an interview schedule is a challenge and a lot of planning and work is required. An interview schedule will mainly constitute identification information or face sheet, census type information and problem information. Further, the types of interview, viz., structured, unstructured and semistructured were also discussed. The advantages and limitations of this methods were also highlighted. The last method discussed was that of case study. Case study can be described as an approach that helps in obtaining information about the unit from varied perspectives. Case study thus helps obtain in-depth information about the unit. Case study can be used to study not only individuals, but organisations/ institutions, events and so on. When a case study is used in a research, it is important to first of all identify the focus of research, which in turn will guide the way the case (unit/ event/ phenomenon etc.) is to be studied by the researcher. In the context of the case study, its characteristics, advantages and limitations were discussed.

5.6 REFERENCES

Bordens, K. S and Abbott, B. B. (2011). Research Designs and Methods: A Process Approach. New Delh: McGraw Hill Education (India) Private Limited.

Goodwin, C. J. (2003). *Research in Psychology: Methods and Designs*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.

Kerlinger, Fred, N. (1995). *Foundations of Behavioural Research*. Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt. Ltd. for information on research, research designs, types of research and methods of data collection.

Majumdar, P.K. *research Methods in Social Science*. New delhi: Viva Books.

Mcbride, B. M. (2010). *The Process of Research in Psychology*. Sage Publications: USA Wilson-

5.7 KEY WORDS

Case study: Case study can be described as an approach that helps in obtaining information about the unit from varied perspectives. Case study thus helps obtain in-depth information about the unit.

Interview: It is a face to face interpersonal role situation in which one person, the interviewer, asks a person being interviewed, the respondent, questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to research problem.

Non-participant observation: In non-participant observation, the researcher/observer will not participate along with the participants in the activities/ events/ phenomena being studied. Thus, the observer will observe the participants passively.

Observation: Observation can be described as a process of data collection in which the units/ events/ phenomena/ individuals are witnessed first hand.

Participant observation: In participant observation, the observer participates along with other participants in the activities/ events/ phenomena being studied so that he/ she is able to gather first hand information and interpret it effectively.

Semistructured interview: Such an interview is a combination of structured and unstructured interview. There will be an interview schedule that is predetermined, but the interviewer has full freedom to modify and make changes in it.

Structured Interview: Also referred to as standardised interview, this type is more standardised as the name suggests and includes predefined questions that are sequenced in certain predefined order and also worded in certain way.

Structured observation:It is a careful definition of units to be observed, a clear delineation as to what a person or group to be the object of observation, what information constitutes the domain of observation, the size of the group and the selection principle thereof, the standardised conditions of observation.

Unstructured Interview: Also termed as unstandardised interview, this type of interview is more flexible and as such questions are not predetermined and the interviewer has full freedom to the ask the questions in the way and sequence that he/ she wants to.

Unstructured observation: In unstructured observation, the guidelines and principles as stated under structured observation are not available.

5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) What is observation?

Observation can be described as a process of data collection in which the units/ events/ phenomena/ individuals are witnessed first hand.

- 2) List the types of observation.

Participant observation

Non-participant observation

Structured observation

Unstructured observation

- 3) State any one advantage and one limitation of observation.

Advantage: It is helpful when participants are not in position to adequately/ verbally answer the questions. For example, young children may not be able to answer certain questions.

Limitation: Subjectivity can creep in during data collection and interpretation.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) What is structured interview?

Also referred to as standardised interview, this type is standardised as the name suggests and includes predefined questions that are sequenced in certain predefined order and also worded in certain way.

- 2) State any one limitation of interview method.

Limitation: It is time consuming and is not cost effective

Check Your Progress III

- 1) List any one feature of case study.

Feature: It is in-depth, thorough and comprehensive study of the unit, be it an individual, event, organisation/ institution etc.

- 2) State any one advantage of case study.

Advantage: The information collected can not only be used to formulate certain hypothesis(es) but it can also be used in order to develop schedules and questionnaires.

5.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the types of observation.
- 2) Explain the concept of observation and discuss its advantages and limitations.
- 3) Describe interview method with a focus on its types.
- 4) Discuss the advantages and limitations of interview method.
- 5) Elucidate case study and describe its the advantages and limitations.
- 6) Describe the characteristics of case study.