How to conduct observation

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Observing the world around us

We are observing the world around us all the time and drawing conclusions, for example, farmers regularly observe and check the growth and health of the crops in their fields.

Richard Kruger[1] identifies three ways in which observation in evaluation is different from the casual, off-the-cuff manner in which we see things. This is because the person conducting the observation is:

1. **Trained**
2. **Prepared**
3. **Systematic**

In this presentation / guide we explore how observation is used in an evaluation context and the steps to take to conduct observation effectively.

[1]Observation in Evaluation, Richard Krueger, University of Minnesota, 2017

Observation in evaluation

> *Observation has a unique niche among evaluation methods. Those who study human behaviour indicate that there is often a gap between what people say they do and what they actually do. The observed behaviour is often a more dependable indicator than what is self-reported."*
>
> *Observation in Evaluation, Richard Krueger 2017*

Observation in an evaluation context can be used in a variety of ways, for example, to analyse individual behaviours, interactions between a group, to learn more about physical settings, to help to understand ongoing process or situations, or to learn more about how participants interact with or within a physical setting.

Types of Observation

inFocus have pulled together some of the most common observation definitions below. Can you match the descriptions on the left to the definitions on the right? (answers are on the next page)

A. Overt/Disclosed

B. Covert/Undisclosed

C. Direct

D. Indirect

E. Informal/Unstructured

F. Formal/Structured

1. Observations are coded based on previously agreed scales

2. Participants are not aware that they are being observed (e.g. observers are concealed)

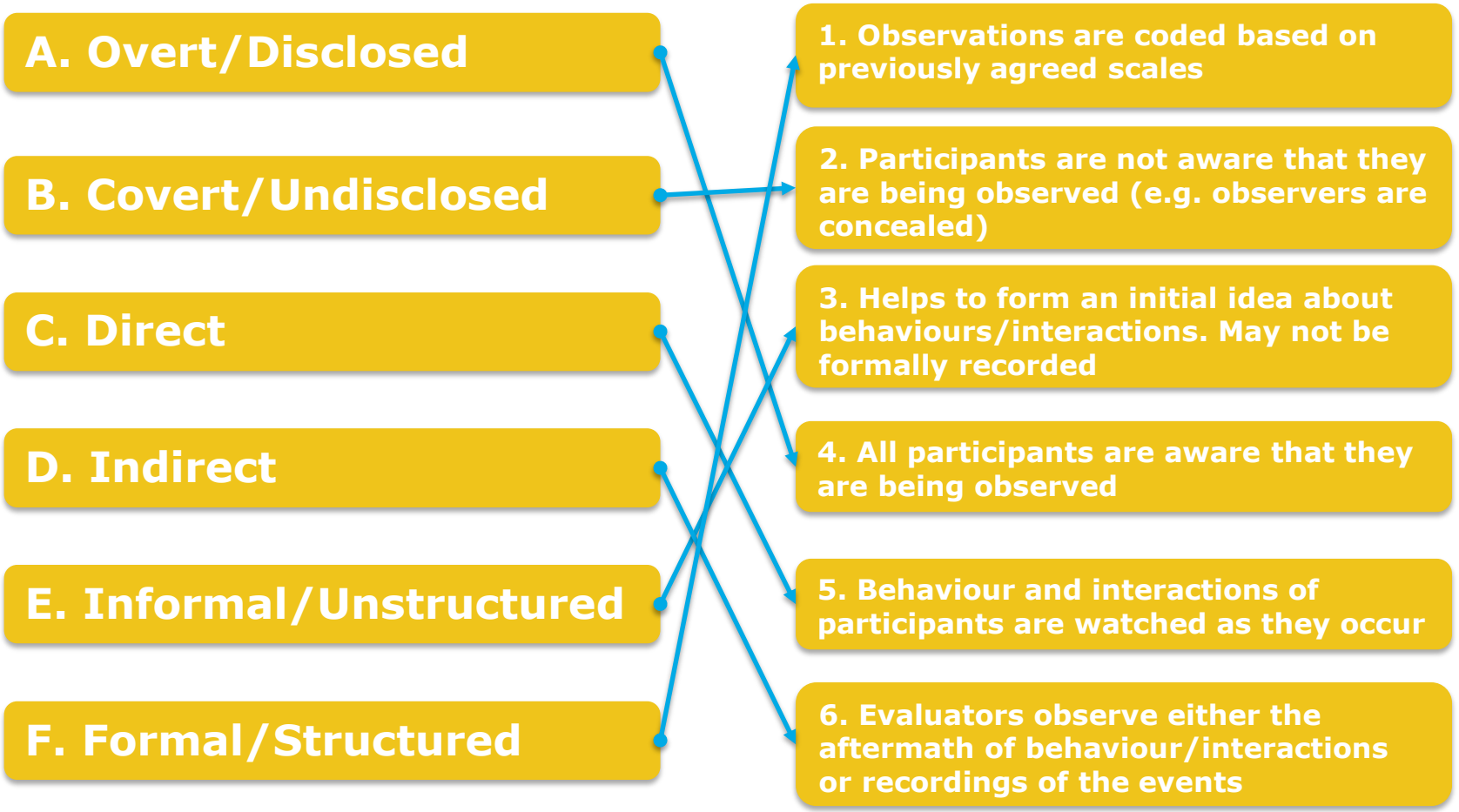
3. Helps to form an initial idea about behaviours/interactions. May not be formally recorded

4. All participants are aware that they are being observed

5. Behaviour and interactions of participants are watched as they occur

6. Evaluators observe either the aftermath of behaviour/interactions or recordings of the events

Types of Observation



Ethics in observation: when to intervene?

Covert / undisclosed observation brings with it particular ethical considerations (particularly regarding consent). However, all observation activities bring with them ethical considerations. For example, to what extent should observers intervene when the observe behaviour or situations that are challenging ethically? A similar dilemma is faced by war reporters, for example, with the photo below from Kevin Carter, most commonly known as 'The vulture and the little girl', which first appeared in print in the New York Times in March 1993. At the time, some people felt that the photojournalist who took the photo should have dropped the camera and helped the girl (actually the vulture was chased away and the girl continued on her journey to a feeding centre, while many photojournalists would argue that the emotional attachment from their subject of their pictures is critical to do their job.

Relationship to other data collection methods

At inFocus, we rarely use observation as a stand-alone data collection method. Rather it can complement other forms of data collection as part of a mixed methods approach.

The observation method can be used in a variety of ways in combination with other methods, as described in the examples to the right.

Unstructured observation is used to * observe activities and get a better understanding of knowledge and behaviour that will be measured.

+

This is then followed up by a focus group to explore whether knowledge and behaviour has changed.

A survey is used to explore changes in knowledge and behaviour

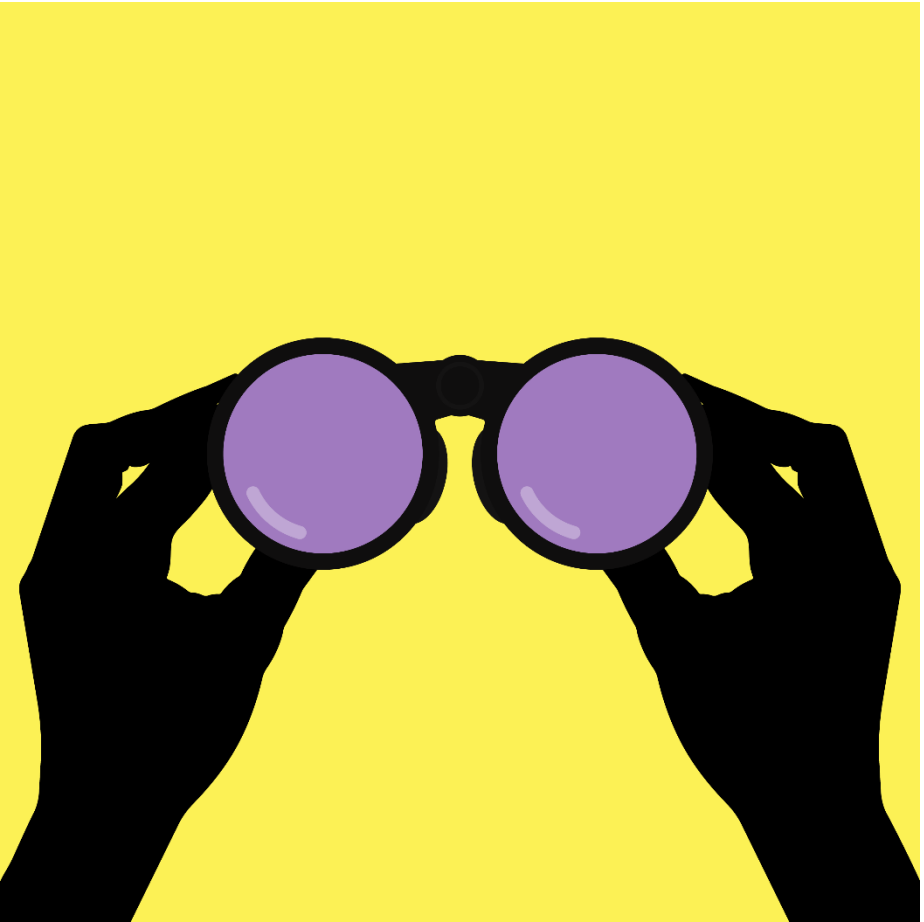
+

The observation method is then used to verify the results and explore further.

*https://psychologywithmisssmith.wordpress.com/research-methods-observations/

Advantages of the observation method

- The observation method is **flexible** and can be used in a broad range of contexts and within a mixed methods. It can also be used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.



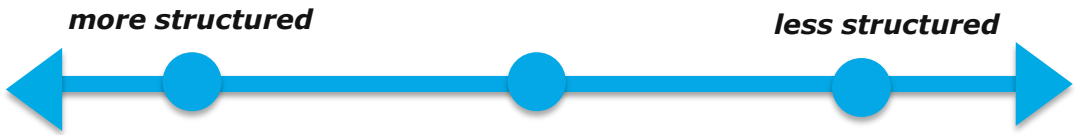
- Does not rely on the **ability or willingness of the participants to assess and self-report** on their own knowledge or behaviour. For example, participants may not also be aware that they are feeling or behaving in a certain way.
- If well conducted, observation can have a **low impact** on activities / services being evaluated and the participants themselves.
- Can provide for a **richer and deeper understanding** of participants through observing them in their natural environment / context.
- Can help with the evaluation of activities with participants that are **particularly shy or have issues with literacy.**

Disadvantages of the observation method

- The data is at particular risk of the **subjective interpretation** of the observations by data collectors.
- Can be **labour intensive** when mainly qualitative data is collected, for example, to train staff, to observe across multiple sessions, and to analyse the data (when mainly qualitative data is collected).
- Observation can be useful to help to understand ***what* is happening**, but without the participants feedback it can be harder to use observation to understand ***why* it is happening**.
- At risk of **disruptions** to the activities being observed, or **distractions** to the observer.
- **Relies on the skills of the evaluators** both to observe and accurately record their observations.
- Can be **stressful for the observers** if they observe difficult or challenging situations.
- Participants may act differently if they know that they are being observed, for example participants may improve their behaviour, or staff look to perform to the best of their abilities. This is called the **Hawthorne Effect**.

Develop observational tools

The next step is to develop the tools you will use to record data during an observation. The ***Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Observation***[1] guide breaks this down data collection methods into three different types:



Record sheets and check-lists
Pre-set questions and responses, although can include room for additional observations.

Observation guides
List interactions, processes or behaviours and space to record narrative data

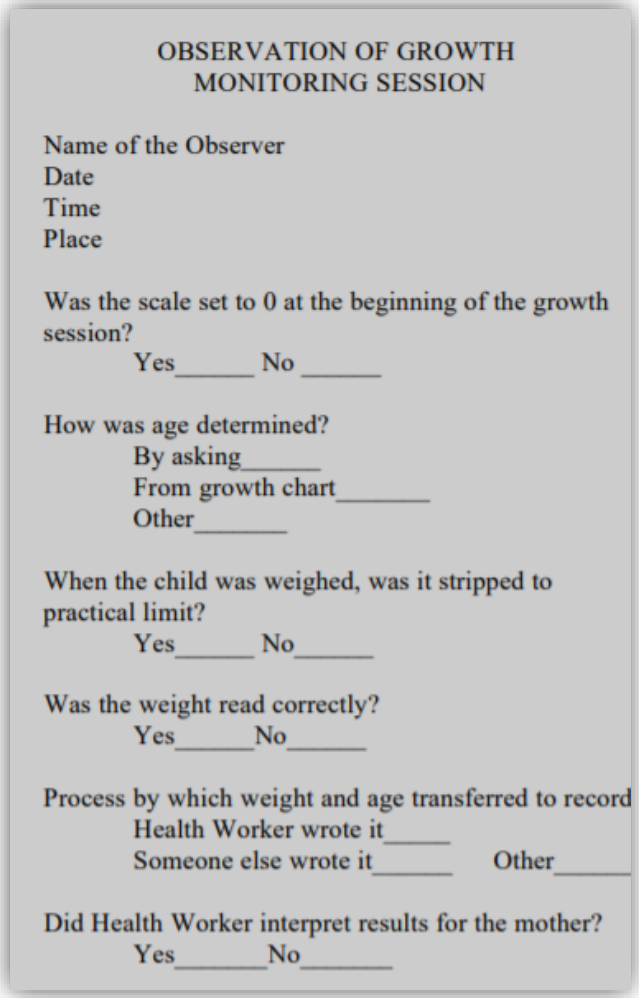
Field notes
Do not include pre-set questions or responses

The tools are essentially similar to surveys, except that data collectors are recording their own reflections, rather than collecting responses from participants. The **How to write questions** video in this inFocus eLearning course can help you to write questions for observation guides.

> During the recording process, the observer usually notes down information relating to:
>
> - the nature of what they observe (e.g. undermining, neutral or supportive comments and behaviours)
> - the extent to which a behaviour or circumstance is occurring (e.g. *'few', 'some', 'many', 'most', 'all' – students demonstrate a behaviour*)
> - how often something occurs (e.g. the number of times questioning is used as an instructional technique)
>
> *Observation: a guide or use in evaluation*

[1] ***Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Observation, Evaluation Briefs, No. 16, August 2018***

Examples of observation tools



OBSERVATION OF GROWTH MONITORING SESSION

Name of the Observer
Date
Time
Place

Was the scale set to 0 at the beginning of the growth session?
Yes_____ No _____

How was age determined?
By asking_____
From growth chart_____
Other_____

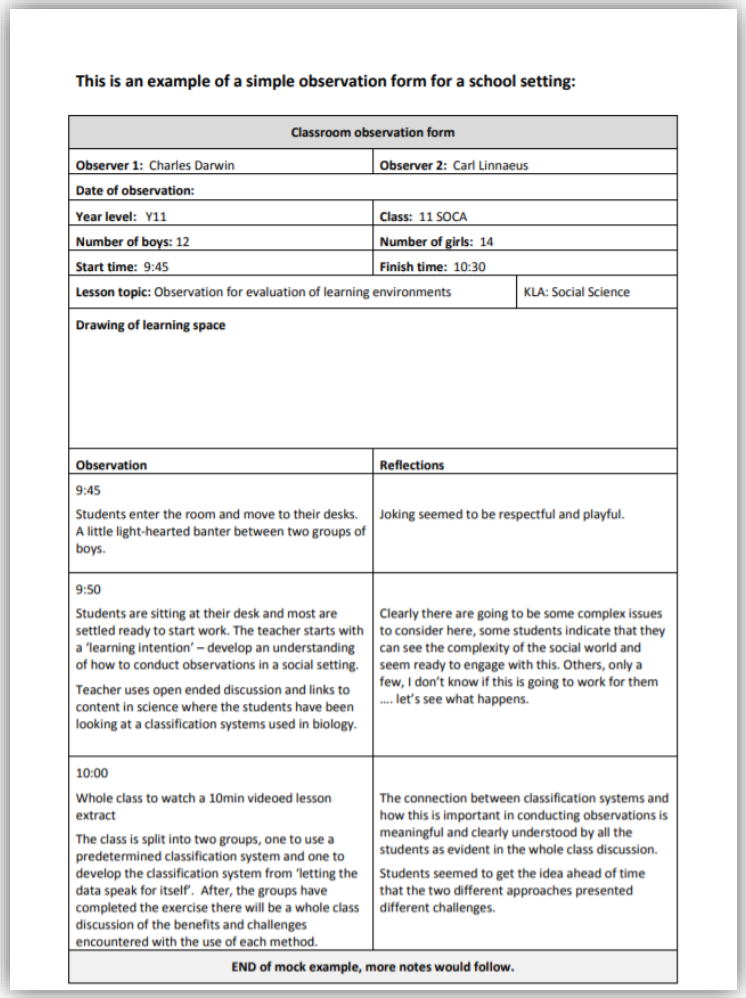
When the child was weighed, was it stripped to practical limit?
Yes_____ No_____

Was the weight read correctly?
Yes_____No_____

Process by which weight and age transferred to record
Health Worker wrote it_____
Someone else wrote it_____ Other_____

Did Health Worker interpret results for the mother?
Yes_____No_____

[Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS: Using direct observation techniques]



This is an example of a simple observation form for a school setting:

Classroom observation form		
Observer 1: Charles Darwin	**Observer 2:** Carl Linnaeus	
Date of observation:		
Year level: Y11	**Class:** 11 SOCA	
Number of boys: 12	**Number of girls:** 14	
Start time: 9:45	**Finish time:** 10:30	
Lesson topic: Observation for evaluation of learning environments		KLA: Social Science
Drawing of learning space		
Observation	**Reflections**	
9:45 Students enter the room and move to their desks. A little light-hearted banter between two groups of boys.	Joking seemed to be respectful and playful.	
9:50 Students are sitting at their desk and most are settled ready to start work. The teacher starts with a 'learning intention' – develop an understanding of how to conduct observations in a social setting. Teacher uses open ended discussion and links to content in science where the students have been looking at a classification systems used in biology.	Clearly there are going to be some complex issues to consider here, some students indicate that they can see the complexity of the social world and seem ready to engage with this. Others, only a few, I don't know if this is going to work for them …. let's see what happens.	
10:00 Whole class to watch a 10min videoed lesson extract The class is split into two groups, one to use a predetermined classification system and one to develop the classification system from 'letting the data speak for itself'. After, the groups have completed the exercise there will be a whole class discussion of the benefits and challenges encountered with the use of each method.	The connection between classification systems and how this is important in conducting observations is meaningful and clearly understood by all the students as evident in the whole class discussion. Students seemed to get the idea ahead of time that the two different approaches presented different challenges.	
END of mock example, more notes would follow.		

[Observation: a guide or use in evaluation]

Decide when and where to conduct observation

- Given time and cost implications, observation can only be conducted at a small number of activities so it is important to think carefully about where and when to conduct.
- It can be useful to come up with a criteria for selecting sites at which observation will take place – for example with different numbers of participants or different degrees of success.
- Ensure the timing of events will ensure you are attending as 'regular' a session as possible that fits with regular routines. Ideally there should be visits to several sites, although a single site may be suitable if it could be treated as a typical case or if it is unique.[1]
- Think about how many sites are needed to ensure your observations are representative of the larger population.

[1] *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS, Using direct observation techniques, USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation*

Preparing your observation team

- Think about which individuals would be most suitable for the role. If using a check-list with mostly closed questions your options will be wider, enabling you to use staff members and volunteers rather than professional evaluators.
- If possible, if you can find more than one observer, it can help to verify the observations and get a second opinion.
- Conducting a trial run of the observation is important, ensuring that your data collectors are comfortable making observation, clear on their responsibilities, and using the tool consistently.
- It can help to put protocols in place to ensure that data collectors can deal with any ethical situations that arise.

> It is critical that the observers are well trained in your data collection process to ensure high quality and consistent data. The level of training will vary based on the complexity of the data collection and the individual capabilities of observers"
>
> *Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Observation*

Conducting observation

- When making notes it is important to ensure that you are recording just what you observe rather than drawing conclusions at this stage.
- It is important to ensure that participants have given consent to the observation, and are clear on the purpose and that it will have no ramifications for them.
- Stay as long as possible to conduct the observation as participants and staff can feel more relaxed the more they get used to you.
- Try to take notes as inconspicuously as possible as it can be unnerving to some participants when you are taking notes as they can feel judged.
- Visuals (e.g. photographs / sketches) can also be useful to help jog your memory.
- Allow time to write up your notes soon after your observation and look to make a distinction between what you observed and how you felt about it.

> Data collected during observation can be subject to bias and it is important to keep this in mind as you collect the data:
>
> - Confirmation bias – looking for and seeing things that confirm our thoughts
> - Observation bias - …where we look in places where we think we will find what we are looking for
> - The halo effect – initial impressions of a person or group of people that influence subsequent thoughts about this person's or the group's capacity or ability"
>
> *Observation: a guide or use in evaluation*

Bibliography/Reading List

- *Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation:* Observation, Evaluation Briefs, No. 16, August 2018, Access: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief16.pdf
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