

# How to do Observations:

## borrowing techniques from the social sciences to help participants do observations in simulation exercises



*When doing simulation exercises in training courses trainers often decide to ask some participants to be observers of the behaviour of the other participants during the exercise. In the debriefing of the exercise the observers are then asked to add their observations, from their different perspective, to the comments of the others about how they interacted during the exercise. More rarely time is taken to take a closer look at the observers and at what they see and notice might say about themselves. For Coyote, Bryony Hoskins explores how the role of observers in simulation exercises can be developed and demonstrates how observations can help us challenge our own assumptions and beliefs and reflect on each individual assumption about the social world.*

by Bryony Hoskins



Observations are an established research technique in the social sciences, which is based on human capacities used in everyday life but requiring a systematic approach and a set of life skills, largely learned through practice itself. Knowledge within a qualitative research tradition is understood to be socially and historically constructed within the context in which it is developed (Burr 1998). This means that all knowledge even that, which is developed through scientific techniques, is not producing an exact truth but producing an account from a particular perspective. Validity in qualitative research is judged through the persuasiveness of argument, use of data from the field and reflective discussion of the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Potter 1996). This understanding of knowledge enables observations to play a pivotal role in constructing accounts of social interaction.

In this article I will explore briefly how social science has used qualitative research and in particular observations. I will discuss the possibilities that participants in training programmes can perform similar observations to produce accounts of social interaction that they can exchange with each other and learn about different understandings of the social world. I will demonstrate how observations can help us notice what we take for granted and see different values in action. I will emphasise four areas to observe: language, power, environment and personal reflections. I will then discuss the possibilities of what to do with these observations once they have been collected.

### 1. Observation research

First, I will explore two different topics within social science research that will give an understanding of what observations enable researchers to do from the sociology of scientific knowledge and feminist/identity research.

Research in the area of the sociology of scientific knowledge developed the understanding of socially produced knowledge through observations of scientific research in action (Woolgar 1986). In this field sociologists took part in observations in scientific laboratories. They watched how scientists interact with each other, select different uses of technology and debate the meanings of results. They observed how science was produced within a particular cultural context. Scientific knowledge was therefore observed as embedded in power relationships between the scientists, the values of the scientists, the language that they used and environment that they worked in. They noted that scientific knowledge is often given to the public as fact rather than acknowledging the cultural aspects. This is why when sociologists in this field produce research they understand their knowledge as accounts or stories that are judged on the basis of argument and values. By giving this example of observations in the sociology of scientific knowledge it is possible to see how observations can help us learn more about what is often taken for granted. For more information on this type of research look at these research centre web sites:

<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/depts/crict/>

<http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk>

Feminist and other identity politics research has played an equally important role in demonstrating that the 'truth' is not value free (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). Their research showed how knowledge was constructed in such a way by privileged white middle class heterosexual men. What is normal and healthy was based upon research carried out on people who fit these categories. Those who do not fit these categories, for example working class women from ethnic minorities, were either invisible in research or described in accounts of madness, lacking in intelligence or criminal. To move away from producing knowledge influenced by these particular values when feminists carry out research, much attention is paid to trying to uncover the researchers' own assumptions in the research process (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996). These self-reflections help to maintain an ethical balance between the researcher/ the observer and the participant/ the observed. It is this process of reflection upon assumption through observations that can be of use to trainers using this technique in simulation exercises. For more information on this type of research there is an article by Millen (1997) online:

<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/3/3.html>

**For more information on identity research a good place to start from is this research group:**

<http://www.sbu.ac.uk/fhss/sexuality/>

I often liken observing in simulation exercises to the work of anthropologists. In old anthropological texts it is very easy to spot the common values and assumptions of the day. For example, when reading famous texts such as Malinowski's (1922) anthropology of the Trobin Islanders, these accounts discuss trips to foreign lands to study 'savages' with their 'primitive' methods.

Having looked briefly at how observations have been used within social science research I will now explore how observations can be used in practice in simulation exercises in youth work. I will suggest a method for collecting observation data and then discuss how to use the observations to develop our understanding of social interaction and reflect on our own assumptions of the social world.

## 2. How to do observations

Having observed a number of simulation exercises, I have noticed that the people who are chosen to be observers are often quite disheartened by this task. They often display disappointment at not being given a participatory role. This is understandable as defining a role as an observer is complex and hard work and their observations are often under-used in plenary discussions of the exercise. If the participants at the start are given an explanation as to the importance of observations and their role in giving feedback at the end this may help them feel that their job is of importance. Another difficulty for the observer is not being able to actively influence events happening in front of them. The observers should be encouraged to explore their frustrations in the notes they take and to ask themselves what they would have done differently.

Writing good observations comes only really through

experience. It is about writing an account of what you see, questioning what you are observing and writing down your thoughts and feelings connected to what you see. What is very important is to note down as much as you can - it is very easy to forget what someone said or what action they took. Mundane discussions or events such as an interruption to the exercise can be important. When you return to your notes you can make connections from these events to action, which occurred later. Do not expect to make profound observations all the time or during the process. Points of interest may not be apparent until returning to your notes after the exercise. It is also important to emphasise that there are no correct answers or correct writing styles for note taking but to choose a method that the observer feels comfortable with such as writing in the first person like a diary or like a journalist in a newspaper article. I would not recommend giving many detailed hints for observations before the exercise. Instead let the observers decide what they think is important to note down. This may provide interesting accounts on areas not thought of by the trainers.

## 3. After completing the exercise

Each observer will finish their exercise with a record of their field notes. My suggestion is that they are given time to reread their accounts and fill in the colour and the richness to the brief notes that they have written.

At this point I would suggest giving the observers some topics to explore. I have described four areas below that are useful topics in developing an understanding of observations: language, power, environment and personal reflections. These are not distinct categories and some inter-linking of the topics is desirable. Under the topic headings I have given a suggestion for possible questions that relate to each area.

### 3.1. Language

Language is important within observations as actions can be performed through speech. The creation of a group name is an example of this. The action of creating a name has consequences towards people both in and not in this group. Language in this example becomes part of a step to a common identity. The international dimension in youth training courses also emphasises the importance of language. Those with a greater capacity to use the common language may, often unwittingly, use their skills to dominate discussions and develop their own interests. Different definitions and cultural uses of language can also cause misunderstandings. All these examples demonstrate how language is inter-linked with issues of power in group dynamics.

#### Questions:

- Are groups of people developing their own language, own identities, sets of rules, use of symbols?
- What are the arguments, justifications and values used in interaction?
- What is the tone of the discussion: calm, heated, lethargic or energetic?
- What is not spoken about that you would expect?
- What surprises you about their discussions or actions?



### 3.2. Power and Resistance

By observing who is doing the talking and the arguments used in the decision-making process it is possible to observe the process of power. Power can be obvious in terms of enforcing rules or physical violence and subtle in terms of being embedded within arguments i.e. 'some of my best friends are black, but I don't think they should all be allowed to move over here.'

#### Questions:

Who is doing the talking and who makes the decisions?  
This refers to identities such as female, male, nationality etc..  
Those who dominate the discussion, how do they dominate?  
What are their roles in the exercise?  
How are decisions made?  
How do groups interact with each other?  
Is everybody participating in the exercise?  
What are those people doing that are not participating?  
Are some people trying to disrupt the flow? Why is this?

### 3.3. Environment

The use of space is interesting as decisions can relate to how they make sense of their environment.

#### Questions:

How do the participants engage with the surroundings?  
Do they actively use them to their benefit or do they see the surroundings as a constraint? How do they change their environment during the exercise?

### 3.4. Personal Reflections

Personal reflections are important as they help to develop a link between the observations and our own experiences. This helps develop a critical understanding of our own actions as well as those being observed.

#### Questions:

How do you feel about what is going on?  
What would you do differently?  
Does this situation remind you of one that you have been in before?  
How did you feel about doing the observations?  
In what way have your observations changed the way you interact with other people in the future?

## 4. Back in Plenary

After the observers have had time to consider these topics and develop their own accounts, I would suggest that the observers take turns to describe back to plenary events that took place in the exercise.

#### Challenging assumptions

The participants and other observers should be encouraged to challenge the observer about what she/he saw. The participants who took the action described may well have different justifications and interpretations for their action to those observed. Participants or insiders in the action will often produce a more limited picture to events and conversations they were involved in, whereas the

observers have the chance to recount the wider story. Trainers should also challenge the different accounts and highlight assumptions made by the observers by suggesting other ways that the events could be understood. The challenges and the differences between the accounts and the questions about the account can be used to reflect on each individual assumption about the social world.

What is so interesting and rich about working in a European dimension is the number of differences of identities and local and wider histories that people have. These differences will help to increase the diversity of the accounts that the participants produce. The particular perspective may come from wider identities of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, country of residence, class or from more local histories. The understanding of knowledge as socially constructed from our own cultural background is very important for observations because every person will produce a different account of the events that they observed or participated within. All of these "knowledges" are valuable towards helping us reflect on our understanding of the social world.

In the process of completing observations you actually learn more about yourself and your own culture than the specific issue of the exercise. By being forced to watch often the mundane in human interactions you begin to question how to participate in interaction. This means that adjusting from the role of the observer back into 'regular' participation is as equally uncomfortable as stepping into it. Some discussion with the observers about their changing roles would probably help them here.

## Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated how youth workers can draw on the techniques of social sciences to develop the role of the observer in simulation exercises. The aims of identity research (feminist, black, lesbian and gay research) and youth work are similar: to develop understandings of the social world in order to make it a better and more equal place and to complete this through reflecting back and challenging our own assumptions and beliefs. I hope that this article has given a reasonable guide of how to achieve this. Rather than write too much, as I mentioned at the beginning, the only way to learn to do good observations is through practice. The next step of learning about observations is therefore to go out and do it. You can observe people in everyday life - in restaurants, banks or markets (just be careful not to be arrested!).

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