Handout 14: Observation

Observation is an important way that we get to know about our world. Researchers can use observation to systematically learn about their world, the people in it and the way that these people think, feel and behave.

There are two types of observations: participant and non-participant.

Non Participant Observation

This involves the researcher getting involved in situations where human behaviour, interactions and practices can be observed first hand. Usually the researcher is known to the group although they may not always know they are conducted a study. An example of this might be Clare Williams study of a mining town in Queensland called Open Cut. In this instance the researcher lived and worked in the mining town as an industrial officer with the mining company that had major interests in the town.

What should be included when recording an observation? This very much depends upon what you want to find out. Sometimes it is hard to know exactly what to record until you have done a few observations and can tell what is relevant. If you can when commencing your research record as much as possible.

How should you record your observations? This will depend upon the group you are observing and whether or not they know you are researching them. If they know you are researching them they may expect you to take notes. Remember the way that video and tape recorders can impact upon different people and take this into account when observing.

Writing Up Observations

It is important to write up your observations in detail in a systematic way as soon as possible (while your memory is fresh). Always note:

- Who you observed
- When you observed them
- Where you observed them
- A description of what happened
- A record of your impressions, feelings and understanding of events.

Participant Observation

This method of observation involves the researcher becoming part of the group or social scene s/he wishes to observe. The researcher not only observes people in this situation but also participates in the everyday activities of the group. This may require working covertly or it could be that the researchers own lifepath has lead them to special circumstances that warrant researching. For example Anne Franks Diary. In addition to self observation and observation of others the researcher can also
conduct in depth interviews, analyse other studies in the area etc. This extra research
evidence can lend validity to the observations.

**Researcher Roles**

- Complete participant: lives in, fully occupied by the activities of the group
- Partial Participant: part-time researcher engages in some but not all group activities
- Associate member: the researcher adopts a role that allows them to be accepted by the group but not a member. Eg. A youth worker can observe young people but may be too old to covertly enter the group.