

Using structured observation to answer questions about an event

Sometimes it's difficult to collect data using pencil and paper, or to interview groups or individuals. These methods may not be feasible or may not get us the information we truly desire for our evaluation. In these cases, consider using observational techniques to help answer evaluation questions.

What is structured observation?

Observation is just as it implies . . . observing behavior or an event rather than asking questions about it. One advantage of observation is that you don't have to ask questions! You just watch and record. "Structured" just means that you won't try to observe everything but will observe that which you decide in advance to watch. When using this method, observers try not to influence the environment they observe.

How does it work?

Observers can either participate in the event (as participant observers) or simply observe the event or situation without participating in it (non-participant observers). You may wish to be a **participant observer** to gain greater understanding of the process, intervention, or event in which you participate. You may wish to be a **non-participant observer** if your involvement as a participant might bias the findings. As a non-participant observer, make sure your lack of participation does not draw attention to your observer role. Will it seem strange to participants if someone is observing? Will this affect the situation or behaviors?

Depending upon the kinds of information you want to collect, you can employ more or less structure in your observation. In general, it is a good idea to have some structure. The following examples show how specific questions help observers answer broader questions of interest. Specific questions help define these broader topics of interest. If you have more than one person conducting observations, define the questions clearly so that everyone has the same understanding about what you are trying to learn and how the observations will be recorded. This will help ensure that each observer answers the evaluation questions in the same way.

Observation of a workplace smoking cessation course

- Grasp of concepts by audience
 - Do concepts taught in the course appear to resonate with the participants?
 - Rolling of eyes?
 - Exasperated sighs?
 - Comments about applicability of what is being taught?
 - Heads nodding in agreement?
 - Do they seem to be getting it?
 - Unsolicited comments?
 - Positive?
 - Negative?
 - Heads nodding in agreement?
 - Frustrated body language?
 - Throwing down pencil?
 - Abruptly leaving room?
- Teaching skills of the presenter
 - Is s/he an effective communicator?
 - Does audience seem to understand what s/he is talking about?
 - Are words used familiar to the audience?
 - Does s/he ask questions of the audience?
 - Does s/he encourage audience participation?
 - Allows time for audience questions?
 - Amenable to being interrupted by questions?

Participant observation of a national conference presentation

- Describe audience's overall level of attentiveness.
 - Maintain eye contact with speakers?
 - Taking notes?
 - Reading or doing other tasks?
 - Approximately what percentage of audience left before the end of presentation?
- Describe audience's level of involvement.
 - Heads nodding in agreement?
 - Heads shaking in disagreement?
 - Unsolicited comments
 - Positive?
 - Negative?
 - Questions asked during or at end of presentation?
- What extenuating factors might have influenced audience behavior?
 - Room too hot/cold?
 - Not enough places to sit?
 - Competing presentations that audience may wish to attend?
 - Outside noise?

Unobtrusive observation of computerized tobacco health assessment

Observer watches from a distance an unmonitored computer station at a health fair that offers to conduct an overall health assessment of smokers.

- Number of visits or approaches to computer
 - May not involve person doing the assessment, but indicates a level of curiosity about it
- Number of persons completing the computerized assessment
- Number of persons picking up QuitLine phone number from table
- Demeanor of persons approaching the computer
 - Tentative?
- Excited?
- Approach alone or with others?
- Any discussion before, during, after assessment?
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