

WATCHING PEOPLE HAVE SEX IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE: CONTROLLED OBSERVATION VERSUS PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

INTRODUCTION

Observation is the cornerstone of much research. Marshall and Rossman (1989) described it as "a systematic description of events, behaviours and artifacts in the social setting under study".

It allows the researcher to see for themselves, and avoids the bias of participants' self-reports. The question is, then, where should the observation take place - in the researcher's or the participant's normal environment.

The controlled observation (CO) involves the participants coming to the lab and being observed there (non-participant observation), while participant observation (PO) has the researcher going to the participant's normal environment and becoming part of that social world. Both methods have been used to study sexual behaviour, and, as with all methods, there are strengths and weaknesses (table 5).

<u>TYPE OF OBSERVATION</u>	<u>ADVANTAGE</u>	<u>DISADVANTAGE</u>
Controlled	Allows controlled measurement of behaviour	Participants are taken out of their normal environment
Participant	Takes place in participant's normal environment	Effect on situation of presence of observer as participant

Table 5 - Main advantage and disadvantage of CO and PO methods.

CONTROLLED OBSERVATION

The CO is an observation that takes place in a laboratory situation. It is not an experiment because there is no manipulation of the independent variable.

Masters and Johnson (1966) were the first to study human sexual arousal with lab observations. A number of physiological measures were used including heart rate (electrocardiogram), muscle tension (electromyogram), and internal vaginal changes (using artificial coital

equipment). Initially a small group of prostitutes were used, but later 382 female and 312 male community volunteers were studied. The age ranged from 18 to 89 years. In total, over 10 000 "orgasmic sexual responses" were studied.

The researchers dealt with a number of concerns from the research:

- The motivation of volunteers to have sex "in public" - Extensive pre-study interviews;
- Confidentiality and anonymity - Masters and Johnson found that the part of the hospital where they had a research suite became very busy with passers-by in the corridor. There was a lot of curiosity to see who was taking part. So the research was switched to "outside office hours" to avoid sightseers
- The problem of performing "in public" - There were practice sessions in the research suite to overcome nervousness.

Table 6 summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the use of the CO to study sexual behaviour.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The PO method allows the researcher to observe the participants in their normal environments, while, often, hiding their identity as a researcher.

Patton (1980) distinguished four types of participant observation based on the relationship between being an observer and being a participant:

i) Full participant (sometimes called active participant) - The researcher is known as a group member only. Thus their identity as a researcher is known by no one in the group studied;

ii) Participant as observer - The researcher's identity is known to some members of the group, like the leaders, only.

iii) Observer as participant (sometimes called passive participation) - The researcher's identity is known to the group as they join in the group's activities;

iv) Full observer - This is non-participant observation.

<u>ADVANTAGES</u>	<u>DISADVANTAGES</u>
<p>1. Allows physiological measures that cannot be gained in everyday situations.</p> <p>2. Allows the use of sophisticated equipment to measure aspects of behaviour.</p> <p>3. Data are collected as they happen, and from multiple sources (eg: machines and human observers).</p> <p>4. More flexible than an experiment which has to maintain strict design controls in all conditions.</p> <p>5. Stricter control than the naturalistic observation, and some form of replication possible.</p> <p>6. Overcomes problems of honesty of self-reported questionnaires.</p> <p>7. Can observe details that participant may not know themselves (eg: how body changes during orgasm).</p> <p>8. Use of volunteers overcomes ethical issues of invasion of privacy.</p>	<p>1. Individuals know they are being studied, and this may change their behaviour in some way (known as participant reactivity).</p> <p>2. Individuals who volunteer to be studied during sexual activity are not typical of the general population.</p> <p>3. Low ecological validity. It is not the same as being in the normal environment.</p> <p>4. Focus upon physiological workings of body and overt behaviour during sex, but not the meanings to the individual.</p> <p>5. Expensive and time-consuming compared to questionnaires.</p> <p>6. Ethics of watching individuals involved in sexual activity.</p> <p>7. Not an experiment, so limited ability to establish cause and effect.</p> <p>8. Practical problems like having sexual intercourse while attached to various physiological measures.</p>

Table 6 - Advantages and disadvantages of the CO to study sexual behaviour.

A classic study using the PO method is Humphreys (1970). He studied the behaviour of men engaged in anonymous sex with other men in public toilets (called "tearooms" by these men).

Initially, he tried non-participant observation by visiting the toilets, but the "tearoom trade" stopped when he arrived. To overcome this problem, Humphreys became a "watchqueen" (a look-out for police officers and strangers as this behaviour was illegal at the time).

Thus Humphreys could be in the situation to observe it without causing the participants to behave differently. This was crucial because it is a very secretive behaviour not usually open to research scrutiny.

Table 7 summarises the advantages and disadvantages of using PO to study sexual behaviour.

<u>ADVANTAGES</u>	<u>DISADVANTAGES</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allows researcher to study behaviour that is usually hidden and secret. 2. Because the researcher is accepted as a member of the group, there is less reactivity by participants. 3. Builds relationships that allows deeper insights. 4. High ecological validity. 5. Does not involve manipulation of variables as in an experiment. 6. Allows the researcher to see the behaviour in context and build a holistic picture rather than focusing on specific variables. 7. Can lead to more specific hypotheses for future research. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The presence of the observer as a participant may change the situation. 2. The observer can become involved in the situation, and thereby less objective. 3. The ethics of hiding identity of researcher from participants (ie deception). Also those being observed do not the right to non-participation in the research, or give informed consent. 4. If participants know researcher is in their midst, they may change their behaviour. 5. The ethics for the researcher of being involved in an illegal activity. 6. Sometimes information cannot be recorded until later, and the researcher may have forgotten something (risk of observer bias). 7. There is only the researcher's report of events, and no independent verification.

Table 7 - Advantages and disadvantages of PO to study sexual behaviour.

ETHICAL ISSUES

All research involves the need for awareness of ethical issues, and both these types of observation have particular ethical concerns (table 8). Participant observation has more concerns including deception as the researcher hides their identity, lack of informed consent, and no right to non-participation in the research.

<u>ETHICAL ISSUE</u>	<u>CO</u>	<u>COVERT PO</u>
Informed consent	Gained	Not gained
Deception	Not problem	Researcher hiding identity and purpose
Debriefing	Given	Not possible
Right of non-participation	Yes	No
Right of withdrawal	Yes	No
Confidentiality	Identity of participants hidden by use of numbers not names	Some; depends how well researcher gets to know participants
Invasion of privacy	Use of volunteers	Invasion
Risk and distress	Participants fully aware of what volunteering for	Embarrassment of being observed

Table 8 - Ethical issues of CO and PO when studying sexual activity.

Generally it is accepted that informed consent is not required for observations in a public place, but, though Humphreys was observing public toilets, the behaviour was private.

Many researchers argue that deception is a necessary evil in order to gain accurate results. This has led the American Psychological Association (1973) to list five conditions that may make deception acceptable:

- The result problem is of great importance;
- The research cannot be accomplished without deception;
- There is sufficient reason to believe that the participants will not be distressed when later findings

- out about the deception;
- The participants still have the right to withdraw from the research at any time;
 - The researcher takes full responsibility for removing any stressful after-effects of the research.

CONCLUSIONS

The type of observation used will depend upon what the researcher is seeking to discover. The controlled observation of Masters and Johnson is best for studying the physiological aspects of sexual behaviour, while PO allowed Humphreys to discover more about the secretive world of men who have sex with men (MSM).

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