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| **Learning Table 7: Observations** | |
| **Participant Observations** | |
| Participant observation is favoured by interpretivists as it allows them to develop and understand of the world from the view point of the subjects of the research. It involves them putting themselves in the position of the person they want to research. This will allow them to achieve verstehen (true empathy).  **Stages of Participant Observation and Related Problems:**   1. **Getting in** – this raises many questions about the researchers’ role. They have a choice to either adopt an overt or a covert role.  * *Covert Role* – A covert role involves the research concealing his or her true identity and even that they are carrying out research. To participate successfully, the researcher would need to share some characteristics of the research subjects such as age, gender, ethnicity etc. * This role is likely to be adopted when a criminal or deviant activity is being studied. A covert role may also be adopted when there is a risk that subjects will change their behaviour because they know they are being studied. * There are also moral and ethical concerns over observing and reporting on people’s activities in secret, deceiving them and not obtaining consent. * *Overt Role* – An overt role involves the researcher disclosing their true identity and the aim of the research they are conducting. * This can result in more valid data as the openness and honesty of the research about what they are doing can encourage subjects to behave naturally. * It also allows the researcher to openly record data instead of having to rely on their memories. * There are less ethical issues involved with overt observation as there is no deception, researchers can also obtain fully informed consent. * However, overt observations may result in unnatural behaviour being displayed (the Hawthorne effect).  1. **Staying In** - In order to be successful, the researcher may have to participate in illegal or unpleasant activities in order to not ‘blow their cover’.  * It is also difficult to ask questions and take notes without arousing suspicions.  1. **Getting Out** – Researchers must leave the group without damaging relationships.  * There may also be possible reprisals against the researcher if criminal activities are involved including arrest by the police but also threats to personal safety by formerly studied subjects. | |
| **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| * The sociology gains first-hand knowledge of the group being studied. More in-depth and valid data can be obtained than by other research techniques. * It may be the only possible method – for example to study criminal or deviant activity. * People can be studied in their normal situation over a period of time, rather than in the artificial snapshot of a questionnaire or interview. | * Positivists claim this method depends too heavily on the personal characteristics and personality of the research, creating in-built bias and making it impossible to check the findings of participant observation studies. * There is a danger of the researcher becoming so involved with the group, seeing the world only as the group does, and developing such loyalty to it that she or he may find it difficult to stand back and report findings in a neutral way. This is known as ‘Going Native’. * It is very time consuming and expensive compared to other methods.   Only a small group is studied and so the data produced in largely unrepresentative. |
| **Non-Participant Observations** | |
| The main reason for carrying out non-participant observation is to reduce the risk that people will be affected by the presence of a researcher or new member of their social group. It may also be used when people are unwilling to cooperate in research.  A problem with this method is that it does not allow the researcher to investigate the meanings people attach to the behaviour they observe. The data produce just reflects the researcher’s interpretation of that behaviour. | |

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| **Methods in Context: Using Observations to Study Education** | |
| **PRACTICAL** | ☺ Observations can easily be converted into quantitative data if a content analysis is used during a structured observation. For example, Flanders (1970) found that in the typical American classroom, 68% of the time is taken up by teacher talk, 20% by pupil talk and 12% lost in silence and confusion.  ☹ Schools are complex places and more time-consuming to observe than many other settings. For example, it look Eggleston (1976) over 3 months just to set up his cover role for his observation.  ☺ However, it may be easier to gain permission to observe lessons than to interview pupils and teachers. This is because it is a frequent event for lessons to be observed in schools and so parental permission may not be required.  ☹ Personal characteristics of the research such as age, gender and ethnicity can affect the process of observation. For example, Wright (1992) found there were few black teachers and her African Caribbean ethnicity produced antagonistic reactions from some white teachers. On the other hand, she found that many black pupils held her in high esteem and would support her.  ☹ Schools are busy places and so the observer may find it difficult to find the privacy needed to record an observation. |
| **ETHICAL** | ☹ There are additional ethical issues involved with observing young people and so covert observation may not be appropriate. The greater vulnerability and limited ability to give informed consent means that observations are normally overt. |
| **RELIABILITY** | ☺ Structured observation techniques are easily replicated and so reliability can be established.  ☹ However unstructured observations are almost impossible to replicate due to the uncontrolled nature of them.  ☹ The personal characteristics of different observers may evoke different responses. For example, Wright found that as a black female, she was met with hostility from some white teachers but was readily accepted by black pupils. |
| **VALIDITY** | ☺ Interpretivists argue that participant observation is high in validity. It gives us an authentic understanding of such processes as teacher pupil interactions and labelling.  ☹ However, the power difference between young people and adults is a major barrier to overcome in observations. Pupils may be hiding their true behaviour or presenting a false image purely because the observer is an adult.  ☹ Furthermore, teachers may be quite skilled at disguising their feelings and altering their behaviour when being observed – for example by inspectors or school managers. |
| **EXAMPLE** | Flanders System of Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC) (1970) looked at teacher pupil interaction in American classrooms. |
| **REPRES’NESS** | ☹ Most observational studies are small scale. Willis (1977) studied a core group of 12 boys. The small scale of such studies results from the fact it takes time to become familiar with the setting, gain the trust of teachers and pupils and carry out the actual observations. This, combined with the sheer size of the education system, means that observing school interaction is unlikely to produce representative data. |
| **THEORETICAL** | *What do positivists and interpretivists think of this method?* |