



## A CONTROLLED OBSERVATION

handout number

6.17

Activity type    Application

This activity and the next one both involve observational studies of children but there the similarity ends. They are designed to assess very different aspects of observational techniques. This one, as the title implies, looks at the

practical and ethical issues in designing an observation in a structured environment and compares it to a naturalistic observation study.

### Practical use

Individual: homework, classwork or assessment

### Additional notes

Given a markscheme, students can mark each other's: this gives them deeper understanding of any pitfalls they might encounter and the way in which answers must be structured in order to gain full marks. It also makes them

think about their work from the perspective of the exam marker. (How many times do exam markers think 'Yes, I know what you're trying to say but you haven't actually said it'!)

### Answers

- Suggest **two** more pieces of observational data that could be collected by the psychologist, one qualitative and one quantitative. (4)  
Qualitative data could include the facial expression of the father, the way in which he plays with the child. Quantitative data could include the number of smiles, the time spent in eye-contact.
- One of the problems of observational research is that of observer bias. How might this have affected this study? How could it have been reduced? (4)  
The observer might tend to notice aspects of behaviour that support his/her own hypotheses. It could be reduced by using more than one observer or by videoing the interaction and then independently checking the scoring.
- Describe **two** ways in which this study differs from a naturalistic observation study. (4)  
The location – it takes place in a controlled environment rather than in the 'field'. The type of behaviour sampled – in a controlled setting, there is control over the environment and therefore this elicits certain responses.
- Suggest **one** advantage that a controlled observation has over a naturalistic observation study. (2)  
In the controlled setting, certain responses are likely to be elicited which may never or only rarely occur in a natural setting. It is easier to make the observations. Comparisons can be made between participants because they are responding to the same situation. It is easier to replicate.
- Name the sampling method used in this study and describe **one** disadvantage of using such a method. (2)  
Volunteer sampling. This is liable to provide a biased sample because volunteers have been shown not to be typical – Ora (1965) showed that volunteers are atypical: they tend to be more easily influenced, moody, anxious, aggressive and neurotic than non-volunteers.
- Outline **two** ethical considerations the psychologist would need to consider when conducting such research. (4)  
Participant distress: whether the child would be upset by the procedure, for example if the father had to take away a toy they were enjoying in order to offer another. Psychological harm: fathers should be given the right to withdraw at any time.
- This study takes place in an artificial environment and is highly structured. Why is this study a controlled observation study and not an experiment? (1)  
There is no IV.
- The psychologist decided to extend this research by repeating the study but using mothers as well as fathers and comparing the two sets. What type of experiment is this? What is the independent variable? What is the dependent variable? (4)  
It is a quasi-experiment (because the IV is a condition that exists (sex of parent) and not a deliberately manipulated variable). The IV is the sex of the parent. The DV is the parents' behaviour (not the child's).



## A NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

handout number

6.18

Activity type    Application

This question is concerned with the use of a naturalistic observation study in a school playground and requires students to consider how observers are trained,

categories chosen and the concept of inter-observer reliability.

### Practical use

Individual: homework, classwork or assessment

### Additional notes

If students do both of the observational study questions (this one and the previous one) you can have a discussion about the different ethical considerations of each as well

as how different these two studies are, despite both of them being concerned with the observation of children.

### Answers

1. Suggest **two** practical factors that must be taken into account when organising the study. (2)

Any reasonable suggestion such as the place from which observation should be made, the number of children to be observed at once, the exact nature of the categories, whether to use videotapes, how the observations can be made without disruption of normal play activities.

2. Some examples of behavioural categories are given above (rough and tumble play, ball games, skipping). Suggest **two** other categories that could be included. (2)

Anything appropriate such as climbing on apparatus; games with small toys such as marbles or conkers; chasing games.

3. Explain **two** ethical problems associated with naturalistic observational studies that the psychologist would need to consider when arranging the study. (4)

You would need informed consent from the head teacher and parental consent. You should also ask the children themselves. You need to consider whether or not you would interfere if the play became violent (protection from harm). (You could include other general ethical considerations, such as not breaching confidentiality when results are published.)

4. Why would it be necessary to have at least two observers watching the same group of children? (1)

To see if they are reliable in their measurements, control for observer bias.

5. Explain what is meant by *inter-observer reliability*. (2)

A measure of the extent to which observers are in agreement with their measurements.

6. Explain how the observers might have been trained in the use of the behavioural categorisation system. (2)

Use an appropriate piece of material (for example, a video of children's play). Get each observer to rate it using the categories, then discuss any discrepancies until agreement is reached.

7. Suggest **two** reasons why it would not be suitable to use an experimental technique in a laboratory to study play in school children. (4)

The children would not behave as they normally would. They may be uncomfortable and nervous. The opportunity for usual play is very limited because of the nature of the environment.

8. One problem with naturalistic observation studies is that observers need to be careful not to influence the behaviour of the participants. How could this be arranged in this case? (2)

Observation from inside the school (from a classroom window) or from anywhere in which the observers would not be obvious.

9. Naturalistic observation studies have high external validity. What does this mean and why is this true of such observation studies? (3)

High external validity means that findings can be generalised to everyday life as the behaviour is studied within the environment in which it would normally occur.

10. Outline **one** disadvantage of naturalistic observation studies. (2)

The lack of control over the research situation makes replication difficult, or there may be many uncontrolled extraneous variables that make it difficult to judge any pattern of behaviour.