2.5 Observation: Participant, Non-Participant, Covert and Overt: 30-minute Pack

AQA 8192 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Use sociological vocabulary and name sociologists where you can.

1 Using your knowledge of covert participant observation, explain the strengths and problems of the researcher's approach in this scenario.

(Total for Question 1 is 6 marks)

2 Evaluate the view that covert participant observation is the best method for studying groups such as gangs or subcultures. In your answer you should refer to sociologists' views and consider more than one point of view.

(Total for Question 2 is 12 marks)

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

3 Calculate the percentage of observation points classed as 'on-task', and comment on what the overall pattern suggests about the reliability of this structured observation method.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

---

4 State one limitation of using fixed behaviour categories (like 'on-task'/'off-task') in structured observation.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

Mark scheme · 2.5 Observation: Participant, Non-Participant, Covert and Overt: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

identifies the method as covert participant observation	**B1**
identifies a strength: because the group does not know she is a researcher, their behaviour is more likely to be natural, avoiding the Hawthorne effect	**B1**
identifies a further strength: joining in over several months should give her detailed, in-depth, valid insight into the group's norms and motives	**B1**
identifies a problem: she cannot gain informed consent from the group, since they do not know they are being studied	**B1**
identifies a further problem: recording observations from memory afterwards, rather than at the time, risks inaccuracy or selective recall, affecting reliability	**B1**
accurate use of terminology throughout (covert, participant observation, Hawthorne effect, informed consent, validity/reliability)	**B1**

Answer: This is covert participant observation. Its strengths are that the group's natural behaviour is unaffected by knowing they are watched, avoiding the Hawthorne effect, and joining in over several months should give detailed, valid insight into the group's norms. Its problems are that she cannot gain informed consent from a group unaware they are being studied, and recording observations from memory afterwards risks inaccuracy or selective recall, affecting reliability.

Question 2

Level 4 A detailed, well-balanced evaluation that accurately explains BOTH the strengths and the problems of covert participant observation, supported by accurate reference to studies such as Whyte's and Patrick's. Strengths and weaknesses are analysed, and a reasoned, supported judgement is reached. Sociological terminology is used accurately and consistently throughout.	**10-12**
Level 3 A clear evaluation that explains both strengths and problems of covert observation, with some accurate detail. Some analysis and an attempt at a conclusion, which may be only partly supported.	**7-9**
Level 2 Some relevant explanation of covert observation, with limited development or accuracy. Little clear evaluation or comparison of views.	**4-6**
Level 1 One or two isolated, undeveloped points about observation, with little or no sociological terminology or accurate detail.	**1-3**
Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**

Indicative content:

- Strengths: because the group does not know they are being studied, their behaviour is more natural, avoiding the Hawthorne effect, and giving high validity.
- Strengths continued: covert methods can give deep access to closed or suspicious groups, such as the gang studied covertly by James Patrick in A Glasgow Gang Observed, who felt an overt approach would not have been possible.
- Strengths continued: extended, close involvement can produce rich, valid data on the group's own meanings and motives, as in Whyte's overt but similarly immersive Street Corner Society.
- Weaknesses: covert observation raises serious ethical problems, including no informed consent and no genuine right to withdraw, since participants do not know they are subjects of research.
- Weaknesses continued: the researcher risks 'going native', and evidence recorded from memory after the event, rather than at the time, can reduce reliability.
- Weaknesses continued: covert studies are usually small-scale and hard for another researcher to repeat exactly, making them low in reliability even where they are high in validity.
- A balanced conclusion should weigh covert observation's strength in validity and access for closed groups against its ethical problems and weaker reliability, noting the positivist tradition tends to favour more reliable, repeatable methods while the interpretivist tradition values the depth of understanding covert observation can offer.

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

Question 3

checks the total: 21+6+3 = 30, matching the stated 30 observation points	**B1**
calculates the percentage on-task = 21/30 x 100 = 70%	**B1**
identifies that because the categories are pre-set and clearly defined, another researcher using the same schedule could repeat the observation and compare results directly	**B1**
concludes this standardised, tally-based approach makes structured observation more reliable (comparable/repeatable) than an unstructured, descriptive observation would be	**B1**

Answer: 21 + 6 + 3 = 30, consistent with the 30 observation points. Percentage on-task = 21/30 x 100 = 70%. Because the behaviour categories are pre-set and standardised, another researcher could repeat the same tally and get comparable results, making this structured method relatively reliable.

Question 4

identifies that the pre-set categories may be too simplistic and force complex behaviour into limited boxes	**B1**
development, e.g. losing detail or meaning that a qualitative, unstructured observation might capture, reducing validity	**B1**

Answer: Pre-set categories such as 'on-task'/'off-task' may be too simplistic and force complex behaviour into limited boxes, losing detail or meaning that a qualitative, unstructured observation might capture, reducing validity.

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk