GSOC.RM5 Observation: Participant, Non-Participant, Covert and Overt

Total Marks

AQA 8192 · Calculators not allowed · about 75 minutes

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

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

1 An observation in which the researcher joins in with the group being studied, taking part in their everyday activities, is called...

- ☐ A) non-participant observation
- ☐ B) participant observation
- ☐ C) structured interview
- ☐ D) content analysis

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

---

2 Define what sociologists mean by the 'Hawthorne effect'.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

---

3 Observation can be overt or covert.

(a) State the difference between overt and covert observation. **(2)**

(b) State one advantage of covert observation over overt observation. **(2)**

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Researchers taking part in a group's activities for a long time face a particular risk.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

---

5 Gaining access to a group can be one of the hardest parts of setting up a participant observation study.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

---

6 Covert participant observation raises particular ethical problems.

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

---

7 State one reason non-participant observation might produce more objective data than participant observation.

(Total for Question 7 is 2 marks)

---

8 State one limitation of non-participant observation compared with participant observation.

(Total for Question 8 is 2 marks)

9 William Foote Whyte's classic study 'Street Corner Society', based on years spent living alongside a street-corner gang in an Italian-American district of Boston, is an example of...

- ☐ A) covert non-participant observation
- ☐ B) overt participant observation
- ☐ C) a structured interview survey
- ☐ D) analysis of official statistics

(Total for Question 9 is 1 mark)

---

10 Whyte's Street Corner Society study is a classic example of overt participant observation.

(Total for Question 10 is 2 marks)

---

11 Studies like Whyte's, in which the researcher becomes closely involved with a group over a long period, attract criticism as well as praise.

(Total for Question 11 is 2 marks)

---

12 A sociology researcher wants to study a small local youth group suspected of persistent minor vandalism. Believing the group would refuse to cooperate, or would change their behaviour, if they knew a researcher was present, she does not reveal her identity, and spends several months joining in with the group's activities, recording her observations from memory each evening once she is alone. [This is a hypothetical scenario, written for this exercise, describing a covert participant observation study modelled on the classic format of studies such as James Patrick's A Glasgow Gang Observed.]

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

(Total for Question 12 is 6 marks)

13 Sociologists disagree about whether covert participant observation is the best method for studying groups such as gangs or subcultures.

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 13 is 12 marks)

---

14 Some research methods give a truer picture of what they claim to study than others.

(Total for Question 14 is 2 marks)

---

15 State one reason observation methods are generally considered high in validity.

(Total for Question 15 is 2 marks)

16 A researcher carries out a structured, non-participant observation of a Year 8 classroom, recording pupils' behaviour every two minutes for a one-hour lesson (30 observation points in total) using set behaviour categories. The table below shows her results.

Behaviour category	Number of observation points
On-task (working)	21
Off-task, quiet	6
Off-task, disruptive	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 16 is 4 marks)

---

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

(Total for Question 17 is 2 marks)

Mark scheme · GSOC.RM5 Observation: Participant, Non-Participant, Covert and Overt

Question 1

- **B1** B (participant observation)
- **Answer: B**

Question 2

- **B1** identifies the Hawthorne effect as the tendency for people being observed or studied to change their normal behaviour simply because they know they are being watched (oe)
- **B1** development, e.g. this can reduce the validity of the data collected, as it does not reflect the group's true, natural behaviour
- **Answer: The Hawthorne effect is the tendency for people being observed or studied to change their normal behaviour simply because they know they are being watched, which can reduce the validity of the data collected.**

Question 3

- (a) **B1** identifies overt observation as where the group being studied knows the researcher's identity and purpose
- (a) **B1** identifies covert observation as where the group does not know, and the researcher's true identity/purpose is hidden
- **(a) Answer: In overt observation, the group being studied knows the researcher's identity and purpose; in covert observation, the group does not know, and the researcher's true identity and purpose are hidden.**
- (b) **B1** identifies that it removes the risk of people behaving unnaturally because they know they are being watched (the Hawthorne effect)
- (b) **B1** development, e.g. the behaviour observed is therefore more natural, improving validity
- **(b) Answer: Covert observation removes the risk of the Hawthorne effect, since people do not know they are being watched, so the behaviour observed is more natural, improving validity.**

Question 4

- **B1** identifies 'going native' as a researcher becoming so involved in or attached to the group being studied that they start to identify with the group rather than staying objective
- **B1** development, e.g. they may start to see the world entirely from the group's point of view
- **B1** further point, e.g. this risks losing the sociological objectivity/detachment needed to analyse the group critically
- **B1** further point, e.g. the researcher may become reluctant to report findings that reflect badly on the group
- **Answer: 'Going native' is when a researcher becomes so involved in or attached to the group being studied that they start to identify with the group and see the world entirely from the group's point of view. This risks losing the objectivity needed to analyse the group critically, and the researcher may become reluctant to report findings that reflect badly on the group.**

Question 5

- **B1** identifies a first problem, e.g. a gatekeeper, such as a group leader, may refuse the researcher entry or permission
- **B1** development of the first problem
- **B1** identifies a second problem, e.g. some groups, such as criminal or deviant subcultures, may be dangerous or hard to approach without an existing personal connection
- **B1** development of the second problem
- **Answer: A gatekeeper, such as a group leader, may refuse the researcher entry or permission to study the group at all. Some groups, such as criminal or deviant subcultures, may also be dangerous or hard to approach without an existing personal connection to gain access.**

Question 6

- **B1** identifies that covert observation involves deceiving the group being studied about the researcher's real identity or purpose, breaching informed consent
- **B1** development, e.g. participants cannot give genuine informed consent to being studied if they do not know it is happening
- **B1** further point, e.g. the researcher may need to take part in illegal or immoral acts to maintain their cover
- **B1** further point, e.g. participants cannot exercise a right to withdraw if they do not know they are subjects of research
- **Answer: Covert observation involves deceiving the group about the researcher's real identity or purpose, breaching informed consent, since participants cannot agree to something they do not know is happening. The researcher may need to take part in illegal or immoral acts to maintain their cover, and participants cannot exercise a right to withdraw if they do not know they are subjects of research.**

Question 7

- **B1** identifies that the researcher stays detached and does not join in with the group's activities
- **B1** development, e.g. reducing the risk of losing objectivity or 'going native'
- **Answer: In non-participant observation the researcher stays detached and does not join in with the group's activities, reducing the risk of losing objectivity or 'going native'.**

Question 8

- **B1** identifies that by staying apart from the group, the researcher may gain less insight into the meanings and motives behind the group's behaviour
- **B1** development, e.g. producing less valid, less detailed data than participant observation
- **Answer: By staying apart from the group, a non-participant observer may gain less insight into the meanings and motives behind the group's behaviour, producing less valid, less detailed data than participant observation.**

Question 9

- **B1** B (overt participant observation)
- **Answer: B**

Question 10

- **B1** identifies overt participant observation as the researcher taking part in the group's everyday life while the group knows who the researcher is and that they are being studied
- **B1** development, e.g. Whyte spent an extended period living in the neighbourhood and befriending gang members, who knew he was a researcher, to understand their way of life from the inside
- **Answer: Overt participant observation involves the researcher taking part in the group's everyday life while the group knows who the researcher is and that they are being studied. Whyte spent an extended period living in the neighbourhood and befriending gang members, who knew he was a researcher, to understand their way of life from the inside.**

Question 11

- **B1** identifies a genuine criticism, e.g. the close, long-term relationship the researcher builds with the group risks bias
- **B1** development, e.g. the researcher may become too sympathetic toward, or protective of, the people they have got to know, affecting objectivity
- **Answer: Critics argue the close, long-term relationship a researcher builds with a group in studies like Whyte's risks bias, since the researcher may become too sympathetic toward, or protective of, the people they have got to know, affecting objectivity.**

Question 12

- **B1** 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)
- **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 13

- **Level 4** (10-12): 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.
- **Level 3** (7-9): 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.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Some relevant explanation of covert observation, with limited development or accuracy. Little clear evaluation or comparison of views.
- **Level 1** (1-3): One or two isolated, undeveloped points about observation, with little or no sociological terminology or accurate detail.
- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **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.

Question 14

- **B1** identifies validity as the extent to which a research method actually measures or captures what it claims or intends to measure (oe)
- **B1** development, e.g. producing a true, authentic picture of what is being studied
- **Answer: Validity is the extent to which a research method actually measures or captures what it claims to measure, producing a true, authentic picture of what is being studied.**

Question 15

- **B1** identifies that observation directly witnesses real behaviour as it happens
- **B1** development, e.g. rather than relying on what people say they do, as in a questionnaire or interview
- **Answer: Observation directly witnesses real behaviour as it happens, rather than relying on what people say they do in a questionnaire or interview, which is why it is generally considered high in validity.**

Question 16

- **B1** 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
- **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 17

- **B1** 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
- **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.**