

## Workplace Utilization of Participative Observation and In-depth Interviewing

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the rationale for an interpretive paradigm in organizational research and examines two specific qualitative techniques that could help define organizational phenomena in a way that would account for organizational problems and issues. These are participative observation and in-depth interviewing which will be evaluated in a case scenario in a workplace context. These techniques have been found to be useful not only organizational research but in practical situations as well. Through an illustration of how security personnel perform their duty at work, we suggest that qualitative methodology can be applied in daily contexts to evaluate the capacity, understanding and the capability of these personnel in relation to their adherence to policy and procedure. It provides richness in terms of experiential narratives that depict the perception of surroundings that construct meanings, structures and actions. Qualitative methodology explores changing, complex social phenomena and helps in theory building and theory elaboration.

Key words: qualitative methods, participant observation, interviews, workplace context  
Stream: Research Methods

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When scientists hope to find the answers to circumstances or make sense of the world around them they use questions to achieve their goals. Science is portrayed as a search for the truth about reality. Social scientists use two basic divisions within a broad field where social research is separated by two distinctive research categories: qualitative research and quantitative research (Babbie, 1986; Eisenhardt, 1991; Perry, Reige, & Brown, 1999). Quantitative research methods are defined by Reichardt and Cook (1979) as techniques of randomized experiments, quasi experiments, paper and pencil 'objective tests' multivariate analyses and the like. Babbie (1986) suggests that quantitative research involves numerical analysis whereas qualitative does not. De

Vaus (2002) suggests that quantitative methods are inherently statistically research based whereas qualitative research methods in contrast involve participant observation, unstructured interviewing, case studies and the like. He states that qualitative research is data rich and depicts real life situations and is used for 'sense-making' of behaviors. Criticisms of qualitative research include that it should be only utilized in the early stages of a research projects in order to gain theoretical and contextual frameworks for the statistical study. It is suggested that qualitative research is the foundation of all research. Qualitative research is often tainted with bias and the reliability of interpretations is often questioned. (Pettigrew, 1992; Silverman, 2000)

In this article, we first provide the rationale for an interpretive paradigm in organizational research and examine two specific qualitative techniques that could help define organizational phenomena in a way that would account for organizational problems and issues. These are participative observation and in-depth interviewing. The use of these two techniques will be assessed in a case study in a workplace context. In a workplace setting these techniques are utilized to gather information and to identify capability. The case study will focus on security personnel who work at the Sydney Airport. These security personnel have a function to screen passengers at the arrival terminals. These qualitative techniques will be utilized to assess the capacity, understanding and the capability of these personnel in relation to their adherence to policy and procedure.

## **2. QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH**

We now discuss the importance of qualitative methodology in organizational research. In contrast to a positivistic paradigm, an interpretivist approach emphasizes truth as a cooperative construction between subjects and their prevailing context. As a parallel, work processes are, in part, a function of the context rather than an objective reality that informs what the researcher needs to perceive. Within this perceptive, the meaning of the data collected will be largely underpinned by the values and reality of the subjects (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In exploring a variety of work processes, it is appropriate to argue that "*perception is the most important reality*" (Perry, Reige & Brown, 1999, p. 6) when the internalization of perceptions is able to make explicit a clear understanding of the subjects' reality. The rationale for exploiting a wide range of qualitative techniques is supported by the view that research is neither value free nor does it involve the objective assessment of causal relationships to achieve generalizability. More importantly, qualitative methodology allows the researcher to treat the "lived" experience and perceptions of others as a unique consequence to a phenomenon (McCaffrey, 2004).

To a large extent, qualitative methods are well suited to the study of dynamic processes, particularly where these are constituted of individuals' interpretations (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hinings, 1997). A crucial aspect of qualitative research is the exploration of individuals' constructions and accounts of their experiences (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Isabella, 1990). Because of its sensitivity to context and its potential in relying on activity sequences as they unfold, qualitative methodology would be useful in investigating complex processes (Pettigrew, 1992). In addition, the main focus of organizational research is on theory elaboration which draws on and extends important ideas from studies involving cognition and behaviorism.

### **2.1 PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATION**

We next discuss a useful qualitative approach, participative observation which is utilized to gain a further understanding of how an individuals or groups behave. In-depth qualitative analysis in workplace contexts is viewed in some cases as more important than quantitative assessment (Albano, 2008; Gummesson, 1991). Participative observation involves a diverse range of theories and methods. It evolved as a further research method that could be utilized when existing frameworks predominately statistically based had little to do with the realities they discovered. There was an emergence of research practice where the researcher engaged as a co-participant in order to assess behaviors and solve social problems. Participative observation is often classed as part of action research where the researcher has shifted from an interpretive mindset to actually participating in an event or scenario. This idea of action research developed from an emphasis that there is a requirement for a problem solving approach in relation to complex social problems (Lewin 1946). This approach to research allowed researchers to become interpretive of situations through actual involvement in an activity. This involvement created a rare opportunity for a researcher to reflect on structures and relationships that had developed within a context which was until this point hard to achieve. This ability to be involved in situations especially those in a workplace context where the goal is to analyze organizational members in order to assess behavioral dynamics has evolved to be an extremely useful tool for researchers (Smith et al, 2000).

We now discuss some theoretical perspectives of participative observation. Firstly, Hickson (1974) develops the utilization of participative theory as a means to assess organizational communication. The role of a researcher in organizational based participative observation setting is to collate data on behalf of an organization. This is best achieved through an understanding of the theoretical framework involved in the task being observed. It is important that the researcher can communicate effectively with the individual or team involved in the process. Hickson also suggests that it is important that the researcher has the ability to both participate and observe in the process in order to ascertain the functions and the social networks. The advantages gained through participation and observation in an organizational setting is that it allows the researcher to focus on a number of variables for example communication and task complexity.

Secondly, Savage (2000) adds to the notion that participative theory is a very effective research method in its own right. The utilization of this technique is beneficial and does not require further theoretical attention or quantitative framework to validate its reliability. When participative observation is performed in an organizational setting research can be developed based on the physical environment and other forms of knowledge transfer between an observer and a subject. Without the use of the participative observation method this aspect of research is difficult to comprehend and ascertain.

Thirdly, Ashworth (1995) further suggests that true participation involves aspects that must be achieved in order to a gain a valid understanding of a process or situation in a social context. The initial goal of the researcher is to ensure that there is an in depth understanding of a process to the point where the researcher must be as attuned as the other individuals participating in the activity. If a researcher is not as knowledgeable fundamental misunderstandings could be concluded that limit the validity of the study. Secondly, there must be emotional and motivational empathy and understandings to the point were the researcher is as attuned as the individuals participating in the activity. If this is not achieved underlying assumptions and the complexity of contextual frameworks cannot be established. Furthermore, it is imperative that there is an understanding that not everybody in a situation can contribute appropriately due to a number of reasons and that identity issues that are developed in social contexts must be analyzed

such as the threat of other individuals. In order for effective participation to be conducted a researcher must be aware of the various underlying social situations that impact a process or situation in the workplace. This can be achieved through initial interviews of subjects or through an in-depth cultural analysis of an organization (Ozanne, 2007).

Oliver and Eales (2008) discuss some important considerations that must be adopted by participative observation researchers. They challenge the ethical areas that are involved in the process. Often participative observation is conducted in a covert manner. This leads to a number of considerations in relation to consent of individuals, their rights and the consequences of the research. The research concludes that it is possible for covert participative observation to be conducted ethically however, interestingly the research found implications to the researcher that should be observed before undertaking such research. Unlike many other forms of research often data is collected by deception where the results will be used to highlight deficiencies and areas for improvement in relation to a workplace setting. The observer is there to assure and report upon adherence to policies and procedures. When placed into a social context as with the literature conducted by Ashworth (1995) dilemmas can be established once an in depth understanding of the emotional drivers and underlying motivations of the observed are achieved by the researcher. It is important that a researcher understands the consequences of the collection and utilization of the data collected before undertaking a participative observation research study.

## **2.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING**

We now discuss the next qualitative approach, in-depth interviewing which is another technique undertaken by qualitative researchers. An interview is defined as a conversation with a purpose (Berg, 1998). In qualitative assessment it is used as a forum to gather information. In-depth interviews are of a formal nature and are structured in order to ascertain and concentrate on specific topics. The in-depth interview is formally structured with a schedule of interview questions. The rationale behind this is to ensure consistency with the subjects studied in order to achieve reliability and validity (Berg, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Stainback & Stainback, 1988).

Silverman (2004) suggests that interviewers construct a social world where data is generated which allows the interviewer to gain an insight into an individual's experience. Silverman highlights two approaches to in-depth interviews were the techniques of open ended and closed questions are used. Silverman argues that open ended questions have validity however it places the researcher in a dilemma as how to present the data collected from this technique. He outlines that complexities of situations are sometimes missed or not understood due to the utilization of closed questions. Closed questions when the incorrect or limited theoretical framework is interpreted to the questions used may not allow the interviewer to gain data that relates to the complexities of situations. As an illustration, Synovate (2008) states that in-depth interviewing allows for personal, sensitive or confidential content to be uncovered that will generally not be ascertained in group environments or forums. Wright (1996) develops this in his studies where he suggests that often in-depth interviews are more viable as they encourage respondents to express, attitudes, behaviors and experiences.

We take a look at the role of the interviewer who serves as a facilitator to encourage open discussion so that perceptions of the lived and perceived experience of interviewees could be richly articulated. It is imperative that the interviewer allows for neutrality by not inducing

attitudes or responses, importantly a non judgmental persona must be projected. This can be achieved by showing empathy to the discussion by reformulating responses or gestures of understanding. Body language also requires specific consideration that provides an open and supportive means of discussion. It is suggested when using in-depth interviews as a research technique that the discussion is taped or transcribed however if this is not possible detailed notes taken during the conversation that capture all of the relevant points can suffice (Medico, 2005).

Guion (2007) describes the different stages that must be considered when conducting research that is based upon data collected from in-depth interviewing. It is important that before the interview is conducted the interviewer has a clear understanding of the purpose of the research problem or issues and has a fundamental understanding of the scope of research. However, as suggested by Medico (2005), it is imperative that the interviewer remains impartial and does not induce personal viewpoints to influence prejudiced responses. There is a fine line in this process as paralleled by Guion (2007). He recommends that in the design phase the interviewer must be aware of the requirements to gain a worthwhile collection of data. The interviewer must anticipate and seek to explore specific topics. The interview should then be conducted to reflect the goals outlined in the design phase. Once the interview has been conducted the post interview phase comprises analyzing the information gathered that relates to the purpose of the study. The data that has been analyzed must then be verified. Guion (2007) further suggests several methods of achieving data verification such as cross triangulation that comprises interviewing other individuals who are close to the source of researched information to gauge and ascertain if similar responses or views are expressed. Another data verification technique is to have a colleague read the transcripts to see if they share the same views or interpretations of the issues under investigation. The final step in the process is to report the findings which should be in a forum that suits the interview interpretation.

We now discuss the relevance of interviewing in group settings. Feder (1997) outlines the various advantages that can be achieved when collecting data by using the technique of in-depth interviewing. It is vital in an information gathering process that the feelings of the group are not reflected by an individual. Often in group situations individual's responses are reflective of the wider group's thoughts and norms. Feder argues that in-depth interviewing is one of the best methods for qualitative research studies. An interviewer has the opportunity to focus on one individual and the only influence that a respondent receives is that of the question. The interviewer then has the ability to probe more effectively into responses in a group scenario such as through a focus group discussion. Feder believes that in-depth interviewing reduces extraneous influences which may have an effect on the validity and reliability of data.

In summary, qualitative assessment is an extremely reliable tool in exploring and understanding workplace processes. Furthermore qualitative tools such as participative observation and in-depth interviewing allow a researcher to understand a perspective that cannot be achieved through statistical analysis. We would like to demonstrate the effectiveness of these two techniques by examining their relevance and utility in specific processes that reside within the work environment.

### **3. APPLICATION OF PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEWING IN A WORKPLACE CONTEXT**

The workplace that we have chosen is the Sydney Airport at the traveler screening point. The assessment is to be conducted on a member of the security personnel whose role is to ensure that

travelers are thoroughly screened. The role of the screening officer is to ensure that items that are perceived to have risk do not walk past a particular restricted point within the airport. It is imperative that the security personnel have a thorough and in-depth understanding of the policies, processes and procedures in order to carry out their duties. Metal detection equipment is used to determine whether individuals have in their hand luggage devices or equipment that are deemed as unacceptable or dangerous to carry onboard the aircraft.

When utilising participative observation to assess individuals' understanding of their specific roles it is important that the assessor has a thorough understanding of the task. The assessor should become part of the process at the screening point. The assessor should communicate with the passengers and ask them to remove all metallic or lethal items from their bags or pockets. The assessor should then ask each passenger to step through the metal detector. The assessor should then follow the procedure of allowing passengers through the checkpoint. By participating in this process it allows the assessor to understand the intricacies and the challenges that are faced by the security personnel. From this point the assessor should then observe the function as carried out by the security officer to ensure that the procedures and policies are correctly adhered to. Following this, detailed notes of the security officers should be taken to correlate and reconcile with the policies and processes as outlined in the site operating procedures. From this activity the researcher can assess and report on the functions undertaken and the aspects of the policies that have been or have not been adhered to (Vaas, 2007).

In order to ensure that the security officer has a clear and suitable understanding of the role as a screening officer an in-depth interview can be conducted to assess his/her competencies. The in-depth interview should be conducted one-on-one and face-to-face that allows the researcher to gauge the body language which is an important component of communication. The researcher can then ask questions that assess the officer's understanding of his/her role and the requirements to complete the task effectively. The researcher should align the questions closely with the site operating procedures and ask questions that involve elaboration and provide opportunity for the security officer to speak openly and freely about the process. The answers should be recorded in a format that allows the assessor to compare and contrast the interviewee's views and experiences with current policies and procedures (Medico, 2005).

The practical methods of participative observation and in-depth interviewing in this airport scenario can help to further understand the security officer's view and experience in the passenger screening process and other issues relating to the safety aspects of the airport. The assessor can help the security office to identify any deviations of policies and procedures due to his/her interpretation and understand of these processes and requirements. The practical data collected can be used to enhance areas that are being conducted accurately and identify areas where further training is required. The data can also be used for further policy and procedural development at airport customs and security checkpoints. The utilization of both qualitative methods complements each other as it allows the researcher to gain a deeper and realistic understanding of the role of a security officer that may involve complex decision making and problem solving (Heilbronn, 2007).

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This article has shown how qualitative research is integral to the understanding of social behaviors. It has been determined that qualitative research is more than merely a supportive tool that complements quantitative analysis. Qualitative analysis has substantial benefits to

contemporary organizational research problems and issues that cannot be achieved entirely through pure statistics. The richness of qualitative data could provide a more interesting slice of experience that depicts social phenomena more accurately than perhaps quantitative data. Through the illustration of the application of participative observation and in-depth interviewing in an actual workplace context, it can be seen that qualitative methodology does play a critical role in understanding organizational and social phenomena helping participants make sense of their environments and respond to situations appropriately. In the case of the Sydney airport, the use of qualitative methodology is appropriate as it explores dynamic processes, particularly where individuals' interpretations of their surroundings help construct these processes (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hinings, 1997). As illustrated in the airport scenario, qualitative methodology examines issues from the perspective of the participant (the security officer) rather than the researcher himself/herself. Hence, such methodology is useful to and appropriate for the study of organizational members' constructions and accounts of experiences (e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Isabella, 1990). Also illustrated in the scenario is the focus on activity sequences as they unfold, both participative observation and in-depth interviewing would be sensitive to organizational context and therefore a valuable means of exploring dynamic and complex processes in organizations (Pettigrew, 1992). On the research front, qualitative methodology is particularly useful for theory building and theory elaboration as it captures and extends ideas that reside in organizational sensemaking. Such methodology is typically utilized in purely inductive, grounded research and in situations where preexisting ideas can provide the foundation for a new study (Lee, Mitchell, & Sablinski, 1999; Yin, 1994).

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