

TECHNIQUES IN RESEARCH

I. The Observation Method

by B. D. BHATIA

THE observation method, as a technique for collecting data, has been widely used in social science. It is specially useful when the overt behaviour of individuals, groups, or organisations and their products and outcomes, has to be studied. Teachers often make periodic classroom or playground observations of pupil behaviour. Clinical psychologists use this method when a child is observed in a play room of a Child Guidance Clinic. A researcher can study the nurse-patient relationships by observing the behaviour of the nurse and the patients in various situations of the ward.

The observer may act as a non-participant in collecting evidence or he may collect his data as a member of the group. The latter is called participant observation or role playing. "In this procedure, the investigator commonly lives with, or shares, in the life and activity of the group under study." By participating in the activities of the group, he may be in a better position to make observations which he could not have made as an "outsider" or "non-participant". Participant observation has been found very useful in researches on sociological and anthropological problems. Again, observation can be made of behaviour under some standardised or controlled conditions. As such, it has to be very systematic and precise.

Whatever the variations of observational methods, there are certain guiding principles to follow :—

The observer must determine in

advance what to observe or what types of phenomena need to be observed and recorded. He must know just what to look for. To ensure this, a schedule may be prepared in advance, in the light of the general and specific objectives of the research problem.

(2) It is desirable to devise a method or plan for recording results of observation. The plan should have distinct informational units. The recording should be done simultaneously if it does not distract or create a barrier between observer and those observed. Even if it has to follow observation, the golden rule is to record observations as soon as possible, while the details are still fresh in the mind of the observer. To facilitate recording, check-lists can be designed to keep the amount of writing to a minimum. These check-lists should be so designed as to include a complete list of observable items. Besides check-lists, rating scales, score cards and scaled specimens can be used to help in summarising or quantifying data collected.

(3) The investigator should observe carefully and critically rather than casually, haphazardly or in a hurried manner.

(4) In order to improve reliability and validity of the technique,

Dr. B.D. Bhatia is a faculty member of the College of Nursing, New Delhi and Director of the Child Guidance Clinic. He is co-author with Miss M. Craig of the book 'Elements of Psychology and Mental Hygiene for Nurses.'

observations should be made at frequent intervals by the same observer. Or the same behaviour may be observed by several observers. These, then, should be pooled, before conclusions can be reached. This is a good device for checking and verifying the observations made.

(5) If accurate instruments such as the scale, audiometer, stop-watch camera, tape recorder are available, they may be used to achieve more refined observations. These can support or corroborate sense observations.

(6) Observations should be objective and free from personal bias. In order to reduce the personal bias, professional training as well as discussion with others are necessary.

(7) We need to check that what we observe is clear and distinct from what we interpret. This implies that the observer should be competent to separate the facts from the interpretation of the facts. Interpretation should follow fact collecting but should be done at a later time.

The technique of observation may take several forms which vary according to their purposes and applications. These include anecdotal records or behaviour diaries ; periodic summaries ; checklists ; ratings and rating scales photographic records and time-sampling observations. Each of these requires a separate discussion, but it may be worthwhile here to say a few words about the time-sampling device.

Time sampling consists of recording verbal and physical activities for a definite period at a particular time of day. These observations are treated as sample of the total behaviour in time, and are generally analyzed statistically to give an objective picture of the individual and his relationship to others in the situation observed. For example a teacher might record everything a pupil does for a five-minute period during a free-reading or study session or a play interval, for a number of days. In this way he can get evidence with respect to the pupils' work or play habits,

(Contd. on page 158)