

OCR Psychology A-level

Paper 1: Research Methods

Observations

Observations

Not all psychological research is carried out through experimental methods - observations can be conducted, in which **no variables are manipulated**, but the researcher **observes and records participants behaviours**, often to look for behavioural patterns.

However, observations **can be used in experiments** in which the IV is manipulated, but the method of collecting data is through observation.



There are different types of Observation:

- **Covert**

- The participants involved are unaware that they are being observed.
- Great for **minimizing observer affects or social desirability bias/ demand characteristics.** This means the results are most likely to be accurate and valid.
- **Ethical issues** are raised when doing covert studies, as the participants **cannot consent** if they're unaware of the study. It is therefore important to ensure of a debrief and ask for retrospective consent (do they give consent after the study has happened, at this point they can withdraw).

- **Overt**

- The participants know that they're being observed.
- **Ethical**, so there are less complications in the study.
- **Demand characteristics** (changing behaviours due to the nature of being watched) may be present as well as **social desirability effects** (changing behaviours to be more socially acceptable, even if they don't represent your actual behaviours).
- This can lead to invalid results.
- However, if studied over a long period of time participants **may forget they're being studied.**

- **Controlled**

- This observation technique involves controlling the situation that is being observed in some way, without there actually being an independent variable.
- For example, Milgram's study is often considered a controlled observation as there was no manipulation of variables between participants, but the situation itself was set up and controlled by the researchers.
- The data collection is likely to be **accurate and consistent.**

- Unlike other observations, **extraneous variables can be controlled for**, making it much more reliable than other observations.
- An observation allows for a **wide range of behaviours and actions** to be recorded.
- The situation and **environment is artificial**, meaning the behaviours being recorded are not necessarily natural.
- **Lacks mundane realism.**

- **Naturalistic**

- Observing participants in their natural environment, often used when manipulating the environment would be unethical.
- **Very useful for obtaining accurate data** on how people really behave in natural situations.
- It is **difficult to ensure the validity and consistency** of the measurements, and **extraneous variables** will be present.

- **Structured**

- A structured observation refers to a normal observation, but where the data collection itself is done in a structured manner.
- Behavioural categories and coding schemes are ways to record the behaviours in a standardised and consistent way. Improves test validity.
- It is much **easier to use coding schemes** as the observers only need to focus on set behaviours that are relevant, and can therefore waste less time noting down irrelevant behaviours.
- **Easy to establish inter-rater reliability** because multiple observers can compare their observations to check for concurrence
- **Behavioural categories are open to interpretation.**
- Some key **behaviours may be missed** because they were not pre-determined on the coding scheme..

- **Unstructured**

- No coding frames or behavioural categories are used; all behaviors observed are recorded.
- **Improves replicability** and can be applied to wider populations as all behaviours are noted down.
- **Much more difficult to record**, especially with a lot of participants. This can cause issues with the validity of the data.

- **Participant**

- The researcher is actually involved with the participants that they are observing.
- **It is the only way of observing some behaviours**, like in an office or business, in which only certain people can gain access.
- Being involved allows for **greater detail and understanding** of the behaviours being observed.

- The **presence of the researcher could influence behaviour** even if they are unaware that that person is a researcher, simply due to personal involvement.
- It can be **difficult for the observer to record information discreetly**.

- **Non-participant**

- The researcher observes the participants from a distance and is not involved with them.
- This is beneficial for the validity of the results as the researcher cannot have any effect on the behaviours by not being involved personally.
- Can raise ethical issues as observations may need to be done without gaining consent if a large population is being studied.

Observations can be structured using **sampling** - behaviours observed are recorded on an event or time basis, improving the consistency of the data.

Time Sampling



Time sampling is a type of sampling in which behaviours are recorded for periodically according to a predetermined intervals, for example, behaviour in a library may be recorded every 5 minutes for 1 minute over the duration of 2 hours.

There are different types of time sampling that you need to understand, and may want to use when describing how you will conduct an experiment/correlation/observation in the exam!

Instantaneous scan sampling: The action performed by the population or individual being observed is recorded at the start of each time interval.

For example, every 10 seconds a researcher may record the action being performed by a toddler in nursery, with any other action being ignored.

Predominant activity sampling: The researcher observes the behaviours across the determined interval, e.g. 10 seconds, and then records the most common or frequent behaviour shown in that time.

One-Zero Sampling: The researcher uses the same time intervals as the other techniques, but instead uses a coding frame to record whether a behavioural action occurred or didn't, rather than writing down each type of action demonstrated.

Event Sampling



Event sampling is a sampling technique used in observations to record certain, pre-established behaviours each time they occur. They are usually tallied each time they occur as a form of data collection.

It is important when conducting an observation to try to establish ***inter-rater reliability***.

This is where two or more observers record the same population or individual and agree on the behaviours observed, meaning the categories or coding frame is reliable and standardised enough to give valid results.

Inter-rater reliability can be established through a pilot-study, and checked after the main study has been conducted (check for no disagreements).

In your paper 1 exam you will get a 12 or 15 mark question asking you to write out a detailed explanation of how you would conduct the experiment presented to you in the question blurb. For top marks it is important that you put each paragraph in context, write out the reasons for your choices and use the key words explained above! Address each bullet point that they give you in the question individually, and always refer back to your own research.