



## Contributions to the application of non-participant observation as a research technique.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this review article is to address non-participant observation as a research technique, considering its characteristics, advantages and disadvantages. In addition, it seeks to offer a description of two variants of this methodology, as well as to provide recommendations for its design. The methodology employed in this text is framed within the parameters of the interpretive paradigm and uses the hermeneutic method to understand and interpret the arguments proposed by authors such as Weber (1997), Mejía (2002), Fernández (2009), Díaz (2011), Campos and Lule (2012), Rekalde et al (2014), Martínez-Cansola (2020), Martínez et al (2022), Rodríguez (2024), among others. These researchers contribute to a greater understanding of the use of non-participant observation as a valuable tool in the field of scientific research, highlighting its applicability and the contexts in which it can be most effective. Through this analysis, it is hoped that readers will gain a more complete picture of the use of this technique in their own research.

**Keywords:-** Non-participant observation, research technique

### Introduction

In the field of scientific research, observation is positioned as a fundamental technique for collecting data and understanding phenomena in their natural context. By using this methodology, the researcher systematically identifies and records the events and behaviours



taking place in the observed environment, without intervening or altering the situation in any way. The main objective of this text is to offer recommendations for the creation of non-participant observation instruments, specifically in the context of social science research, taking into consideration their characteristics as well as their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, it will seek to present two types of observation (direct and indirect) with concrete examples of applications in the field.

The methodology that guides this text is aligned with the parameters of the interpretative paradigm and resorts to the hermeneutic method in order to understand and interpret the arguments that describe observation as an essential technique in scientific research.

In the discussion and conclusions, it can be affirmed that non-participant observation presents itself as a versatile and enriching research technique that offers the opportunity to explore and understand phenomena in a holistic manner. This approach not only enhances the validity of the results, but also contributes to the depth of the analysis. Given its ability to capture the complexity of human behaviour, observation becomes an indispensable resource for researchers in a variety of disciplines. By mastering this technique and its multiple strategies, valuable information is obtained that enhances the understanding of social dynamics and surrounding phenomena. In this way, non-participant observation not only enriches research, but also opens up new ways of interpreting social reality.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this study is based on the principles of the interpretative paradigm and is framed within a qualitative approach. The hermeneutic method is used as a key tool to interpret the ideas and arguments of various authors relevant to the field of study. This approach seeks to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of non-participant observation as a research technique, considering its characteristics, benefits, limitations and recommendations for its design.

The application of this methodological approach allows for an in-depth and contextualised exploration of non-participant observation, which helps to better understand its usefulness and relevance in scientific research. In addition, this methodology promotes a critical analysis that helps to identify opportunities for improvement and best practices in the application of non-participant observation in research contexts, thus ensuring greater validity and reliability in the results obtained.

## **Results and analysis**

### **Theoretical reflections.**



There is no doubt that observation is an intrinsically human activity, in which individuals use their senses, mainly sight, to acquire knowledge about a specific object of study or phenomenon. The action of observing transcends the act of looking, as it implies adopting a particular attitude and approach that shapes and constructs the reality under analysis. During the observation process, questions arise and questions are generated about what is perceived, according to Fernández (2009).

It is indisputable that observation is an inherently human activity, where individuals use their senses, especially sight, to gain knowledge about a particular object of study or phenomenon. Observation is distinct from simply looking, as it involves adopting a stance and an approach that shape and construct the reality being examined. Through observation, questions are raised and what is perceived is questioned, according to Fernández (2009).

In general terms, observation can be defined as a descriptive activity that seeks to reveal the nature of things and to understand the context before any intervention. However, it is also considered an active process that includes the mental selection and classification of what is perceived, becoming a means of organising and structuring the information gathered.

In the broad field of scientific research, some consider observation as a method and others as a technique. Although both concepts have similarities, they differ in one fundamental aspect: the method is strongly influenced by the discipline in question, while the technique is more flexible and can be applied in different areas. In this text, we define observation as a technique that, through specific resources, optimises the organisation, coherence and efficiency in the development of research. Thus, the structure and coherence of this technique are adapted to the method used.

From a philosophical perspective, it is argued that observation is the process by which a person refines sensory information through thinking, including the creation of ideas, judgements and reasoning, thus enabling them to construct their knowledge about the world. It is crucial to recognise that the processes involved in observation are logical and deliberate sequences that take place within a defined temporal and spatial framework. These processes can occur over days, weeks or even months, depending on the scope, experience and objectives of the researcher in relation to the phenomenon, object or event being analysed. Campos and Lule (2012).

Weber (1997) argues that observation adopts a comprehensive-explanatory approach that considers social relations as meaningful actions. From this perspective, the definition of the object of study involves the creation of 'ideal types', which are representations of possible relationships that facilitate a causal explanation of human actions. In this way, the cognising



observer perceives reality in a partial way and uses these ideal types as interpretative tools. In this context, objectivity is obtained from the interpretation and use of these models, and the understanding of reality is achieved through the abstraction of typical features, which are considered as models of rational behaviour.

On the other hand, Mejía (2002), in his work 'Perspectiva de la Investigación Social de Segundo Orden', argues that the observation process transcends the mere perception of sensations and entails the active application of theoretical frameworks that facilitate the selection of data from reality. Furthermore, he emphasises that the dynamics of observation goes beyond the mere interpretation of data, acquiring meaning through theoretical structures that contextualise it and give it meaning. In this way, Mejía argues that external reality should be seen as a structured interpretation that possesses intrinsic meaning, underlining the relevance of theoretical frameworks in the interpretation of observed phenomena.

According to the methodologists, Díaz (2011), Campo and Lule (2012), Rekalde et al (2014), and Martínez-Cansola (2020), several fundamental characteristics that define the observation process are identified. First, observation is considered an innate ability present in all human beings, which is exercised mainly through the sense of sight. This ability not only allows people to capture visual information, but is also essential for the interpretation and analysis of what is perceived in their environment.

Secondly, the application of the observation is impaired by the observer's perspective and previous experiences. The knowledge he or she has accumulated over time, as well as the cultural and situational context in which he or she finds him or herself, significantly influences his or her ability to interpret visual data and to make relevant connections between them.

In addition, observation acts as a method of perception that facilitates the acquisition of information about the environment. This process allows individuals to explore and understand the world around them in a more effective and conscious way.

Observation can be carried out directly, involving a person's sustained visual attention to the object of study, or it can be done through the use of various tools and technologies, such as lenses, specialised equipment, computers, microscopes and telescopes. These tools extend the human ability to detect subtle details that might otherwise go unnoticed by the naked eye.

Finally, observation can manifest itself spontaneously, arising without prior intention on the part of the observer, or it can be a methodical and structured process. In this case, a series of systematic steps are followed that guide the observer through the investigation and understanding of a particular object or phenomenon, ensuring that data collection is more





organised and reliable. This duality in the approach to observation highlights its versatility as a method in various disciplines and study contexts.

According to Riba (2017) and Martínez et al. (2022), Non-participant observation is defined as a research technique in which the researcher engages in observing a specific subject or group without engaging in any kind of information exchange. From this perspective, the observer captures data through visual or auditory observation of the subjects, but does not provide any form of feedback or information in return. This implies the absence of any form of interaction or social relationship between the observer and the observed.

In this context, it is essential to emphasise that the subjects of the observation are not aware that they are being evaluated or that they are part of a study. They do not have the capacity to recognise the observer as such, as they have not been previously informed about the existence of a research in which they are protagonists. The dynamics of this technique is characterised by a marked asymmetry of information: while the researcher has access to the events and behaviours of the subjects, the latter remain outside the observation and its purpose. Thus, a clear distinction is established between the knowledge of the researcher and the ignorance of the observed subject, which highlights the nature of this methodology in the field of social research (Riba, 2017).

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

One of the main advantages of non-participant observation is that it allows the researcher to maintain a more objective view of the phenomenon under study, as the direct detachment makes it easier to avoid biases that could arise from a personal immersion in the observed situation. This technique is particularly effective for analysing social events or meetings, where the researcher can collect data and behaviours without interfering in the dynamics of the group.

However, this methodology also has some disadvantages. One of the most significant is that, by being physically distanced from the object of study, the researcher may lack a deep and nuanced understanding of the social interactions and contexts that shape participants' behaviour. This limitation makes non-participant observation not the most appropriate choice for investigating complex social structures or activities that require a more active participation of the observer, as the lack of interaction may lead to less complete or less relevant data collection for the objectives of the study.

### **Types of non-participant observation**

In Non-Participant Observation, the researcher observes from an external position, without interacting directly with the group or context under observation. This technique is characterised



by its objectivity, given that there is no risk of the researcher influencing the behaviour of the participants.

According to methodologists Martínez et al. (2022) and Rodríguez (2024), non-participant observation, also known as external observation, is carried out in two different ways that allow the researcher to examine the context and behaviour of the group under study without intervening directly.

The first form is direct observation. In this approach, the researcher is physically in the field of study, but stands aside, without interacting with or influencing the observed group. This method allows researchers to capture the dynamics and interactions of the group in real time, providing a more authentic and spontaneous view of the situation. To facilitate the process of recording and analysing the information obtained, a variety of tools can be used, such as logbooks, where detailed observations are recorded, chronological factual records that document the unfolding of events, and checklists that help to systematise and classify relevant aspects of the observation.

The second modality is indirect observation. In this case, the observer is not present at the study site, but relies on external documentary sources to gather information about the group. These sources may include historical archives, newspaper articles or video recordings, which provide an overview of the group's activities or behaviour over time. Through this method, researchers can analyse not only visible aspects, but also broader contexts, considering accounts and testimonies that enrich their understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Both modalities offer valuable alternatives for those seeking to carry out a rigorous study without interfering in the dynamics of the investigated environment, thus allowing a more objective and faithful data collection to the observed reality.

### **Recommendations for the design of direct non-participant observation instruments.**

Recommendations for the design of a non-participatory observation instrument, focused on addressing the problem of inclusion among students at the Universidad Popular del Cesar.

1. Problem: Levels of inclusion among students at the Universidad Popular del Cesar.
2. Context: Universidad Popular del Cesar, an educational institution in which problems of inclusion among students from different academic programmes, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities have been reported.
3. Aim of the Observation: To assess the dynamics of interaction between students from different backgrounds and their level of inclusion in academic and social activities within the Universidad Popular del Cesar.



4. Methodology: Qualitative research using Non-Participant Direct Observation: Select the observation space within the university (Choose common spaces where students interact, such as the cafeteria, rest areas, and corridors between classes. You can also select specific classes that tend to have a diverse mix of students).

5. Definition of Variables to be Observed: take into account the following:

- Frequency of interaction between students from different groups.
- Inclusion/exclusion behaviours (e.g. whether a group of students always invite some and not others).
- Group formation in academic and social activities (are they homogeneously grouped or is there diversity?)
- Language and attitudes (observation of whether there are comments or teasing that may indicate exclusion).

6. Recording Observations: Use a field notebook, tape recorder or video camera to document observations in real time. Notes should be accurate and descriptive, indicating who the observed groups are, the specific interactions and the context in which they occur.

7. Observation Time: Conduct observations over several hours and on different days to get a broad view of student interaction.

8. Data Analysis: Review notes and classify observed interactions. Look for patterns in how cultural, ethnic and socio-economic differences impact student inclusion/exclusion.

Example of Observed Situation:

Observation Implementation Days: October 5, 6,7 and 8, 2023.

Time: 12:00 PM to 2:00 PM

Location: Central Cafeteria of the university.

Example of General Observation:

Tuesday, September 5, 2023. The cafeteria is crowded and groups of students are observed seated. One group at a table is made up of students from the law programme, all sharing animatedly. In one corner, a student of African descent sits alone, looking at his mobile phone. At a nearby table, a group of students from the sociology programme are joking and laughing, but upon observation it is noticeable that they are only addressing a specific classmate, constantly excluding a student who has tried to integrate.

Examples of Interactions Noted:



- Every 10 minutes, it was observed that the law group invites other classmates to join, but others who are clearly from other programmes are not invited.
- The student who attempts to join seems discouraged and withdraws after several attempts to be part of the conversation.
- The laughing behaviour in the sociology group intensifies the perception of exclusion, as the peer does not understand the references they use, which leads her not to participate.

Example of Conclusion of the exercise done on Tuesday 5 September 2023

The data collected from this non-participant direct observation can be used to analyse group dynamics and provide recommendations on how to improve inclusion at the university by fostering spaces where students from different backgrounds are integrated and promoting activities that facilitate culturally diverse interaction.

#### **Recommendations for the design of indirect non-participant observation instruments.**

1. Problem: Levels of inclusion among students at the Universidad Popular del Cesar.
2. Context: At the Universidad Popular del Cesar, a problem of inclusion among students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds has been identified. The aim is to understand the social dynamics and barriers that some students face in order to integrate effectively into the university community.
3. Objective of the observation: To analyse the attitudes and behaviours of students towards inclusion and diversity, using documentary sources that allow us to understand how this problem is experienced on campus.
4. Methodology: Documentary Sources:
  - Survey files: Surveys previously conducted by the university on the perception of inclusion among students will be collected. These surveys may include questions on interaction between different groups, perceptions of discrimination, and opportunities for participation in academic and social activities.
  - Academic records: Enrolment and academic performance data for students from different ethnic and socio-economic groups will be analysed. This may help to identify patterns that indicate whether there are inequalities in access to academic resources.
  - Articles and Features: Articles and features published in the university's institutional newspaper that address events related to diversity and inclusion, such as conferences, workshops or cultural activities, will be reviewed.
  - Videos of University Events: Recordings of events, workshops or integration activities will be sought, looking at how students interact during these events and whether there are visible moments of exclusion or active inclusion.





## 5. Data Analysis:

- Identification of Themes: A thematic analysis of the collected documents will be conducted to identify patterns and recurring themes, such as attitudes towards inclusion, lived experiences of different groups and perceived barriers.
- Comparison of Results: Survey results will be compared with academic records to see if there are correlations between perceptions of inclusion and academic performance of specific groups.

## 6. Presentation of Results:

- A report will be produced detailing the trends observed from the documentation analysed, including graphs and statistics illustrating the findings.
- Recommendations will be made on how the university can improve its inclusion policies and practices based on the results obtained.

## 7. final reflections (Conclusion):

Indirect non-participant observation becomes a valuable tool for understanding the phenomenon of inclusion in the university, allowing for a more objective and comprehensive data collection without the direct influence of the observer. This approach can contribute to improving inclusion and diversity initiatives at the Universidad Popular del Cesar, ensuring that all students feel valued and respected in their academic environment.

## Conclusions

Non-participant observation, as a scientific research technique, is presented as a flexible and in-depth tool that facilitates the exploration of social and other disciplinary phenomena from a contextual perspective. This approach allows capturing complex interactions and nuances that enrich both the validity and depth of the results obtained. By offering a comprehensive view of human behavior in its natural environment, non-participant observation, in its two modalities (direct and indirect), becomes an invaluable technique for researchers. Mastering this tool provides them with access to detailed and significant information, essential to improve the understanding of the dynamics of the problem under study.

This article has been designed with the purpose of reflecting on the role of non-participant observation in scientific research, highlighting its characteristics, advantages and disadvantages. In addition, key recommendations have been provided for the design of observation instruments that facilitate organized, accurate and relevant data collection. These suggestions seek to ensure that the data obtained are not only consistent and structured, but also useful for achieving a deeper understanding of the observed phenomena. In short, the



article offers a practical and detailed guide for scientists, aimed at optimizing the implementation of non-participant observation as a relevant research technique.

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