

## FIELD OBSERVATION

### WHAT IS IT?

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Good old fashioned looking around in “real” life (i.e. not in a lab and not scripted).

- \* **Systematic:** Even when you first hit the field, even when you’re trying to gather everything to decide where to start, you need to be systematic or you run the risk of focusing only on the things that interest you, rather than the dominant things going on.
- \* **Open-ended vs. Focused:** Most people use both, often by starting with open-ended observation, and then focusing on a particular behavior or group or event once they have a particular question, topic, or hypothesis.

### HOW DO YOU DO IT?

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- \* **Start by counting, naming, listing, mapping:**
  1. **Who** is there? Titles? Roles? What distinguishes them? Only men or women? Ethnicities? Ages? How many of each?
  2. **What** is going on? What is being done? What are the steps? Activities? What are people talking about?
  3. **Where** are you? What does the physical space look like? What’s on the walls? What are the distinct areas? How is the space marked out? [Consider sketching a map]
- \* **Relationships:** For all of these items and lists, what are the relationships we might be able to draw between these elements. Often we take our observations (and other data, such as from interviews) and order it in taxonomies (both hierarchical and non-hierarchical). This helps us understand the group or place. We might look for underlying themes or patterns, including the values held by the people who occupy the place you are observing.
- \* **Questions:** As you go, keep a running list of questions that you want answered. This is easy to do since many of your comments about what’s going on will be tentative but you will need to train yourself to remember to do it.

**NOTE:** Your observations don’t have to focus around a place though your observations are tied to a concrete point in space and time. They can also be organized around age, geography (often very temporal ones, like riding in an elevator as well as regional and national ones), education, occupation, social position, region, ethnicity, recreation, religion, family, personal relationships, etc.

## **WHAT IT CAN ACCOMPLISH**

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- \* Helps us address what is happening “out there,” as opposed to what we think is the case or what happens in constructed experiments.
- \* Allows us to discover rather than simply test, thereby reasoning by induction rather than deduction. There is the potential for us to find out, for example, what’s interesting to the people we’re studying, not just what’s interesting to us.
- \* Provides a means for triangulation by testing data from observation against published research and what people say in interviews.
- \* Useful for constructing taxonomies that help us categorize and order the particular phenomenon, scene, etc.
- \* Useful for addressing the world *today*, and thus for identifying change over time.

## **LIMITATIONS**

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- \* Can require a good deal of time if you’re trying to make broad conclusions. You may need to go back to the place at various times of the day, on different days, to make sure the things you’re observing are typical. Need to be aware of the limitations of your sample size.
- \* Generally not very good at addressing historical questions, at least in terms of behavior, except as a means of understanding change over time. Surveying old buildings, however, can be very profitable, but is generally not considered part of field observation.
- \* Categories you list and names of things are yours and may not reflect the group you’re working with. You will generally want to supplement observations with interviews and library research as you progress in your research.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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Sending students into the community to observe is potentially one of the least intrusive field methods. However, students should still be prepared for possible ethical dilemmas and safety issues arising from entering the field. Please review the ethical guidelines posted on this site in order to prepare your students to enter the community respectfully. Virtually all of the issues on these guidelines are relevant, but some of the areas of particular concern in terms of interviewing are:

- \* Learning local norms of conduct
- \* Decisions about masking the identity of people or places
- \* Sampling representative times, behaviors, etc.

## **PRACTICE**

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- \* **Class Exercise: Observe the classroom.**
- \* Have students use the classroom they are sitting in to perform field observations. You can prompt them with the list below for what they might gather information about but it might be more revealing to let the students develop this list.
  1. the people who generally occupy this room (students, professors, cleaning staff...)
  2. the people there **now**
  3. the institution (the department, Elon, universities generally...)
  4. the kinds of activities that take place there (class, student group meetings, workshops...)
- \* Then have students write a paragraph that describes the place and what goes on there.
- \* Finally, have students share what they came up with and note the discrepancies between their descriptions and discuss why there are discrepancies or omissions. How many, for example, drew a map? What kinds of conclusions did they draw? How many focused only on the here and now? What conclusions did they draw? And so forth.

## **COURSE APPLICATIONS**

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Field Observation can be a useful process for virtually any discipline and in a number of classroom activities, from informal observation around campus used as part of class instruction to more extensive observations that serve as integral parts of major projects. Some examples of how and why field observations might be incorporated into the classroom are listed below:

- \* To give students a first-hand encounter with a particular group they are studying
- \* To engage students with their local community
- \* To train students to reason inductively from the data compiled from observation
- \* To allow students to work deductively and test various theories or hypotheses

Examples of how Elon faculty have used or could use field observation in their classes:

- \* In Performing and Visual Arts to be able to reproduce specific styles of movement or images
- \* In Religious Studies to address differences in worship styles
- \* In Psychology courses to compare stated behaviors with actual behaviors
- \* In Biology to gather primary data for analysis of natural phenomenon
- \* In Communications to report accurately
- \* In Sociology to observe social norms
- \* In English to develop descriptive writing skills
- \* In History classes to address the nature of change over time
- \* In Business classes to observe real world problem solving