42 Fly-on-the-Wall Observation

Fly-on-the-wall observation allows the researcher to unobtrusively gather information by looking and listening without direct participation or interference with the people or behaviors being observed.

Fly-on-the-wall is differentiated from other types of observation, such as participant observation, because it intentionally removes the researcher from direct involvement with the activities or people under research. Fly-on-the-wall attempts to minimize potential bias or behavioral influences that might result from engagement with users. However, it may also reduce the researcher's ability to connect empathically with people and probe further into motivations behind participant behaviors.

As with other forms of observation, various degrees of structure may be put into place, although generally fly-on-the-wall observation is conducted flexibly, without predetermined criteria to specifically categorize or code observations. However, worksheets or other guiding frameworks may still usefully inform fly-on-the-wall observation (see Observation and AEIOU).

John Zeisel discusses observations from the vantage point of the observer, and suggests two forms that are relevant to fly-on-the-wall.[1] *Secret outsiders* are distant observers, with a vantage point that removes them from participants, minimizing any influence the presence of the researcher or recording equipment may have on behaviors. This form of observation may be limited in capturing individual nuances of interaction and personal depth.

Recognized outsiders have the nature of their research and role as observer made known to the participants being observed, although like a fly-on-the-wall, they position themselves in a natural and unobtrusive way within the environment under study. Despite best efforts to remain distant and unobtrusive when observing, a disadvantage of this method may still be the tendency for people to change their behaviors when they know they are being studied or observed, also known as the "Hawthorne Effect," stemming from a landmark study where this influence was first identified.[2] Another caution is perceived partisanship, if the researcher is associated with particular factions (such as management) within the environment or organization being observed.

When choosing observational methods, let appropriateness for the situation and the research question at hand guide you. For example, fly-on-the-wall might be appropriate when you are observing public places and activities, or when you are studying work processes that may be unduly influenced if interrupted or inconvenienced. Any time you believe that people may edit their speech and actions if observations are intrusive, or the observer's presence will change behaviors, fly-on-the-wall may be a good choice of methods.

1. Zeisel, John. *Inquiry by Design: Environment/Behavior/Neuroscience in Architecture, Interiors, Landscape, and Planning*. New York: Norton, 2006.

2. The Hawthorne Effect is the recognized influence on the behaviors of people because they are under observation or study. The term originates from a study of worker productivity in response to manipulations of lighting levels in the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company in Chicago, in the 1920s and 1930s. Productivity was seen to increase regardless of degree of lighting manipulation and other workplace changes, and drop when studies were concluded, leading to the belief that the intervention itself, or the interest being shown in workers, was responsible for short-term increases in productivity. See, for example:

Landsberger, Henry A. *Hawthorne Revisited*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1958.

Behavioral	Quantitative	Innovative	Exploratory	Participatory
Attitudinal	Qualitative	Adapted	Generative	Observational
		Traditional	Evaluative	Self reporting
				Expert review
				Design process

See also *57. Observation • 76. Shadowing • 92. Unobtrusive Measures*