

Work and Health
CHS M278/EHS M270
Spring 2012

Participant-Observation of a Workplace

Participant-observation is a useful social scientific method to unobtrusively observe people in their “natural” environment. The purpose of this exercise is to familiarize you with the technique of participant observation by having you observe a worker in their work environment with a specific focus on the stressful exposures they encounter (**environmental AND psychosocial**).

We want you to observe ONE worker for at least 45 to 60 minutes, preferably a work environment where you will be as unobtrusive as possible and where you can sit without having to get permission from human resources or someone’s employer.

Work environments you might want to consider visiting include:

Retail stores
Coffee shops
Restaurant/Fast food chains
Hospitals/clinics
Public transportation
Universities
Grocery stores

Please do not approach the worker/employee or “blow your cover” unless approached and asked specifically about your activity. Then be honest about what you are doing and assure individuals you are not reporting this information anywhere and in discussions will not use their names. If they do not want you to observe them, respect their wishes and move on to another person. Please also keep the worksite anonymous in your ½ page summary report (see last page of handout).

Please complete the following worksheet. Be prepared to discuss your observations in class.

* Please mark N/A for questions which are inapplicable to your worker or which you were unable to observe.

Type of Worksite: _____

Type of Job: _____

Time of Day: _____

Length of Observation: _____

Number of workers present OR employee works alone: _____

Number of customers: _____

Is there a supervisor present? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Physical environment – hot, cold, noisy, dirty etc _____

The following questions all pertain to the ONE worker you chose to observe in his/her work environment. You should consider each of the following and take notes immediately after the observation and be ready to present your observations in class. If you are not sure, or you did not observe anything, please say so.

1. What kind of work activities do you observe the worker performing?

2. Conflicting Demands – Is the worker being asked to do multiple things at the same time or multiple tasks by different people?

3. a) Does there appear to be an excessive amount of work?

b) If so, does he/she look overwhelmed?

4. Does he/she look like they are:

Working hard ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure, How so? _____

Working fast ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure, How so? _____

Have time pressures? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Have enough time to get work done? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Having interruptions and disturbances? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Making decisions on own? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

5. Repetitiveness – Does his/her job seem repetitive?

6. Creativity – Is there a chance for her/him to be creative? For instance, if he/she is working in a coffee shop, can he/she make up a new drink for a customer based upon customer preference, or suggest something out of the ordinary?

7. Responsibility – What types of responsibilities does he/she appear to have?

8. Supervision of others – Does he/she seem to have to supervise others?

9. Fun/play – Does he/she look like they are having fun or a good time. Do you observe he/she joking with customers or with coworkers?

10. Risk/stakes – Is there anything at stake if he/she do not perform properly?

11. Excitement – Is there an element of excitement, vigilance and/or danger to his/her work?

12. Incentives/rewards – What seems to be his/her incentives? Is there anything posted around the manager's office, pictures of employee of the month, etc?

13. Overtime – Were there any comments made about overtime to customers or co-workers?

14. Odd shifts – Do you know what shift/hours he/she is working?

15. Does he/she have to constantly stoop, sit in an awkward position or do the same motion over and over again?

16. Worker/Supervisor: Does their supervisor appear concerned, helpful, or successful in getting people to work together?

17. Worker-coworker: Are coworkers competent, interested, friendly, helpful in getting job done?

18. Does the worker have constant contact with people or does he/she seem isolated?

19. Worker/client (customer): Are customers/clients appreciative, hostile or abusive?

20. Did you witness any emotionally charged situations?

21. Do you think he/she has to put on a happy face no matter what?

22. Did you witness any traumatic situations or physical dangers to the worker?

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