

## STAFF REACTIVITY TO OBSERVATION

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### INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that the least inferential method of collecting data is the sampling of behaviour in naturalistic situations (Goldfried and Kent, 1972). Observational methods have been widely used in the study of environments for people with learning difficulties, both in descriptions of the actions and interactions found (e.g. Felce et al, 1986; Veit et al, 1976; Wood, 1989) and evaluations of interventions on staff work (e.g. Mansell et al, 1982; Montegar et al, 1977; Schinke and Wong, 1977). Despite the apparent objectivity of an observational approach in such situations, there is a concern with the effects the approach has on the phenomena studied. One of these concerns is reactivity.

Reactivity refers to the suggestion that the behaviour of subjects may be modified by the experience of being observed (e.g. Sykes, 1978). In a wider context, reactivity can be applied to assessments other than those using direct observational methodology (Haynes and Horn, 1982), examples of which would be the presentation of self in psychometric tests and interviews. Zajonc (1965) suggested that some part of reactivity may be a result of the general social facilitation or inhibition produced when another person is present. If this is so, it is potentially in operation whether a person specifically instructed to observe is present or not.

Dubey et al (1977) warn against the "implicit assumption" that observation does not affect the behaviour of subjects. They point out that if there is an influence, then the validity of data suffers. Both internal and external validity can be affected (Haynes and Horn, 1982), hence the importance of minimising potential effects. In a review of the range of effects Haynes and Horn (1982) state that those studied have most been those on behavioural rates. They list increased and decreased rates of responding, differential effects on different behaviours and different subjects, increased variability and systematic changes in rates, rate changes associated with demands in the situation, changes in behaviours of others in the subjects' environment, orientation to observers and deficits in task performance. They also point out, however, that reactivity may not be restricted to rates but may also affect factors such as conditional probabilities and latencies. Such a wide range of possible effects means that it is important to be cautious in the interpretation of results.

In order to assist the researcher who is using observation as the central methodology in his/her work, Harris and Lahey (1982) suggest that s/he should "become familiar with the reactivity literature vis a vis his or her subjects, observers, research settings and target behaviours and take whatever precautions are

dictated by that literature . . .". However, in their review of the reactivity literature, only one of two institutionally based studies of reactivity was based in a residential service and there appears to have been little specifically on this topic since then. The main relevant study reviewed (Hagen et al 1975), examined reactivity in a 28 place locked unit where a milieu therapy program was in operation and where staff training to work with the residents had exposed them to observation. The presence and absence of observers was varied during data collection which was known to be used for staff evaluation. Concealed microphones were constantly switched on to record staff interactions. The rate and number of words spoken and the appropriateness of staff interactions were not significantly affected by the presence of the observer. The suggestion was that the previous exposure of staff to observation had accustomed them to it. In many of the facilities for people with learning difficulties where studies have taken place, staff may be unfamiliar with being observed, for evaluative purposes or otherwise, so the representativeness of this study may be limited.

In a subsequent study in a psychiatric setting, Milne and Hodd (unpublished) examined the reactivity and activity of staff and patients in dayrooms. During interviews the four staff questioned indicated that the observer had had no effect on their behaviour, and only one that the patients may have reacted. The observational data also indicated few differences in staff and patient behaviour across observation periods and these seemed to be accounted for more by habituation over time than obtrusion (the positioning of the observer in the dayrooms rather than an office from which the dayrooms were visible). The main changes for staff were a reduction in staff involvement in patient personal care and a reduction in rewarding of patient behaviour. This second finding bears particular relevance to studies of staff-client interaction in that it shows a decrease in staff-resident interaction, rather than an increase in what might be considered desirable staff behaviour. However, contact with the observer was limited as the daily length of observation sessions was about 20 minutes and the frequency of occurrence was two evenings a week over 5 months. Further, the observer was stationary, which might not be an appropriate way of collecting data for some studies.

Although Milne and Hodd found habituation had a stronger effect than obtrusion, there is some disagreement over habituation. Hagen et al (1975) found that reactivity decreased with increasing frequency of observation and Johnson and Bolstad (1975) found no evidence. If it is assumed that habituation does occur, Haynes and Horn (1982) suggest that data from early observation sessions may have less external validity than subsequent data. Thus putting an observer in place before baseline data collection (e.g. Nordquist and Wahler, 1973) or treating the initial hours of data collection as a habituation period and not using the data in the final analysis may be advisable.

Various suggestions have been made to minimise reactivity. One which is rarely made is that of a thorough rationale. Johnson and Bolstad (1975) suggested that this may reduce the guardedness and anxiety of the subjects. This positive feature has to be weighed against subjects trying to present themselves in what they see as a positive light (e.g. Patterson and Sechrest, 1983). Reassurance that no individual would be identified has also been suggested as a potential means of minimising reactivity (Hagen et al, 1975). Of the more traditional suggestions, many apply only to research settings where facilities such as one-way mirrors and unobtrusive recording devices can be used. The range of options

is more limited for observers in naturalistic research settings. It has been suggested that the observer be as unobtrusive as possible (e.g. Haynes and Horn, 1982; Harris and Lahey, 1982). This means not interacting with, or minimising contact with the subjects of observation (e.g. O'Leary and Kent, 1972; Kirmeyer, 1985) and indeed others in the research setting, which in turn is made easier by avoiding eye-contact (e.g. Beasley and Mansell, 1987). Indeed, such instructions to observers are implicit in most of the observational literature on staff and residents in residential facilities for people with learning difficulties, where the observer attempts to interact with the environment as little as possible.

Avoidance of eye contact and minimising of any interaction were the observer tactics used in two studies of staff activity and interaction in two community based residential facilities for people with learning difficulties. A short questionnaire given out at the end of the studies included questions which attempted to determine the effect of the presence of the observer. Of course, asking about the effect is potentially reactive in itself, but this is to be weighed against the relative lack of such work in the field, in which direct observational methodology is so popular.

## **METHOD**

Two studies of staff activity and interaction were carried out in community based group homes; one with 7 residents and one with 9 residents. Individual care staff members (not Home Leaders) were observed for continuous periods of 15 minutes, and the observer spent between 1 and 3 hours a day in each setting, 2 or 3 days a week for approximately 5 weeks, thus being present on a fairly regular, but not constant basis.

The research was explained to staff as being to write down "... a brief account of what staff experience..." in community based settings. Staff were also told in an introductory letter that the observer would not be interacting: "although the presence of an observer may be a little unusual, I will try to be as unobtrusive as possible, so will not be talking to people or taking part in activities...". Staff were asked to explain the presence of the observer to the residents - due to their closer relationship with them. Eye contact was minimised and any interactions brought to an end as quickly as possible. At the end of sessions, however, and on entering the houses, the observer spent a little time socialising, before telling the staff that observations were about to begin.

Home 1 had 7 residents, 3 people were described as having moderate learning difficulties and 4 people as having severe learning difficulties. In Home 2, there was a greater range of ability among the 9 residents. 1 person was described as having moderate learning difficulties, 6 people as having severe learning difficulties, and 2 people as having profound learning difficulties.

At the end of the studies, staff were given a short, confidential demographic questionnaire, which included questions about reactivity. Staff were asked to provide a yes/no answer to whether the presence of the observer changed their own behaviour or that of residents, and to make suggestions about how the effect of the observer could be minimised in future studies. Space was also provided for comments. In Home 1, 7 of the 8 direct care staff observed responded; and in Home 2, 8 out of 10.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are presented for staff opinions of whether the presence of the observer had an effect on the behaviour of the individual respondent and that of the residents.

**TABLE I**  
**Reported effects of observer on staff and resident behaviour**

	Home 1	Home 2	Total
<i>Effect on self, no effect on residents</i>	1	2	3
<i>Effect on self, effect on residents</i>	2	1	3
<i>No effect on self, no effect on residents</i>	2	5	7
<i>No effect on self, effect on residents</i>	2	0	2

A range of opinion was evident on the effect of the presence of the observer. Although the numbers of staff responding are small, this represents 15/18 of the direct care staff observed. The range of opinion is wider in Home 1 where residents are more able, where staff were approximately evenly split between thinking that the presence of the observer affected or did not affect the behaviour of staff or residents. This may not be entirely unexpected as in a house with more able people, an outsider may be more disruptive, at least for residents. Observer presence may also be disruptive for staff in this situation as, presumably, staff and residents are more independent in such a setting. However, the lack of a consistent pattern of responses may suggest that the effects were 'evened out' to some extent. In Home 2, the most common answer was that both staff and resident behaviour were unaffected. Again, this may reflect the ability of the residents and the existing patterns of relationships within the house.

### **Effects of the observer on the behaviour of staff**

9 staff members felt that their behaviour was unaffected by the observer; and 6 staff reported effects. A further question attempted to elicit the nature of the effects, asking what staff did more of, what they did less of and what parts of their behaviour stayed the same. Of the 6 staff reporting effects, all expanded this into comments.

Of things that staff reported doing more, 4 reported doing more household chores or finding things to do, and 2 reported more work with residents (including more verbal communication mentioned specifically by one respondent). Thus it appears, if the responses are to be seen as representations of what actually occurred, staff wish to appear busy while being observed, and find things to do,

even though, as one person pointed out, they may be unnecessary.

Of things that staff reported doing less, 5 mentioned less 'relaxing' or sitting around; (3 in general terms and 2 with respect to residents). In addition to this, one respondent mentioned doing fewer activities with residents. The observer may thus be intruding into a very delicate staff-resident relationship, where the ability to be oneself when with the residents is altered by the presence of an outsider. It may be that relaxing alone or with residents, though an important part of the staff day, is not 'visible' so more 'visible' activities are taken to instead.

Staff were also asked what parts of their behaviour stayed the same. Responses here ranged from reporting nothing stayed the same, through basic interaction with residents staying the same, an 'attitude' change when being observed talking to other staff and reporting that overall behaviour stayed the same once initial feelings of self-consciousness had passed.

#### **Effects of the observer on the behaviour of residents**

10 staff members reported that the presence of the observer had no effect on the behaviour of the residents. 5 staff members, however, reported some effects, 4 of which were staff working in Home 1, where more able residents lived.

Of the 4 reports by staff in Home 1, two mentioned residents 'showing off', but one that in some cases residents were 'more quiet than usual'. The last report noted that residents did not understand why their attempts at conversation with the observer were rejected and were upset. This was paralleled by the report of the one person reporting change in the behaviour of the residents in the home with less able residents, saying that the more able residents enjoyed communicating with people "... and when somebody comes into a home and does not speak, but only observes, they must find it difficult to understand, and I feel this will change their behaviour and confidence towards other people."

#### **Suggestions from staff on minimising observer effect**

10 staff members made suggestions about minimising the effect of the presence of the observer. Because in this style of research, reactivity is such an important issue, it is felt to be worthwhile to reproduce the comments in full. Several staff suggested that more involvement would have been helpful:

I feel that the student would have been better off if she got more involved with the staff and residents.

To be able to communicate on a friendly basis with staff and residents.

I feel that the residents sense something and may easily find this uncomfortable, whereas if the person doing the research was more friendly and talkative, I think better results could be achieved as everyone would feel more relaxed and behave as they would everyday, and would not mind someone being nearby. By this way, no barriers would go up.

Observing is all well and good, but the pleasantries of life should not be sacrificed. Hello, no thank you, or whatever, should not detract one from observing.

Others were concerned that the residents did not understand what was going on:

I felt that your point of making yourself so inconspicuous was worthless, as we all knew you were there. This made me feel self-conscious. I also felt disturbed that the residents were in a sense ignored when they spoke. Even though we tried to explain your presence, it was very hard to make them understand why you wanted to be left alone. My suggestion is don't try to be so unobtrusive, just be a little more sociable, because we will always act differently when being observed.

The clients don't understand what is going on and so I would think it is more difficult for them than the staff.

A resident was upset by the fact that you wouldn't speak to her when you were working.

I would suggest that before you start your observation, you explain to residents what your purpose is and that therefore you cannot be disturbed.

Two staff suggested some form of getting used to the people in the house, whether deliberately or just over time:

If possible get the staff and residents used to your presence before you actually start your observations.

At first I felt the presence of the observer, but after a while, it didn't worry me at all.

The final comment suggested participation rather than observation as a more fruitful method of research:

It would be easier if the observer was to actually work with the staff and residents. That way they can find out a lot more also be able to understand how the place runs.

These comments suggest that a strictly non-participative approach may not in fact be the most appropriate one to use when observing staff in small domestic settings in which such detached behaviour may seem particularly out of place. However, this has to be balanced with the dangers of some very limited interaction leading to difficulties for staff and residents in knowing how much interaction is in fact possible. However, staff showed remarkable good will and patience in this research, and the fact that many were willing also to comment on what had occurred indicates that this rich source of possible data should not be disregarded in future observational work.

## **SUMMARY**

An observational study of staff working in two community based residential facilities for people with learning difficulties was carried out. At the end of the observation periods, both staff groups were given a short questionnaire to assess the effect of the presence of the observer. Opinions about whether the observer had an effect on the respondent and the residents varied. In the home with more able residents, a greater variety of opinion was obtained; whereas in the home where residents were less able, the most common response was no effect of the observer on either the staff or the residents. Staff comments are reported in order to provide some picture of how staff react to such observational research.

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