

Tips for Observing

What is it used for?

Observing (groups of) people in an environment that is “natural / daily” for them or in a prepared “artificial” environment / experimental setup. These tips can be easily adapted for processes e. g. in a technical or natural realm.

Important principles:

- Six or four eyes / ears are better than two
- Don't judge: Reflect and let go your own biases, values, prejudices, assumptions of someone's seemingly likeable ways of thinking & acting
- Observe at different times
- Use a mixture of a clear set of goals for an observation and engaging in the flow of ambiguity and not plannable events

Focus points of observation:

Perceive in an attentive, curious, cautious way:

- Patterns: connection of multiple objects / components of processes; routines AND breaks / variations of routines
- Things, impulses, events that spark certain behaviour or a noticeable change
- Adaptations - hacks or workarounds that people do / apply / evolve to make something work better for themselves
- The unexpected: Anything that is out of place
- Problems and how they are (not) solved
- Distribution of tasks and tools / items that are used to pursue them
- Ways of interaction / communication AND the body language

Focus points emerge also from approaches of social spatial methods (see separate information!).

Dialogue as part of observation

Observation is perceiving and also interacting:

- Asks questions to single persons or groups
- Help people to formulate self-developed questions in order to understand the user's perspective even more. Let the interviewed person walk in your shoes: if you would interview the users of the space, what would you ask them?
- Initiate discussions
- Use methods of performance / theatre

Field notes

First of all: They are far more than written words. They can be a combination of:

- Text
- Data / statistics
- Photos
- Audios
- Graphics / Drawings
- Videos
- Any kind of co-created material / performance

Often it is valuable to observe for a predefined amount of time or time segments.

Reflective Notes

There is also the need to observe yourself during / after the observation process.

Take your time and reflect on the following questions:

- How do I feel about the observed?
- What seems to be unexpected and strange to me?
- Did I understand everything? What was known and how can I find out more about it.