Qualitative Data Toolkit: Observation Process

Introduction to Observation

Observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people, activities, and places. The purpose of observational data is to describe, not critique, the setting that was observed and the activities that took place in that setting.

For the purpose of the Community Profile, observations should not be used as a stand-alone data collection method, but as a supportive method to further explore issues that have been mentioned in surveys, focus groups and/or interviews.

For example: To further explore interactions, processes, situations, or events that affect access to breast health/cancer services captured by other data collection methods (e.g. key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys), observations could be used to:

- Explore interactions between individuals and how they communicate with each as mentioned from other data collection methods.
  - For example: Observe the interaction between a medical clinic’s monolingual administrative staff and a limited-English speaking Hispanic woman.
  - Observation could lead to the following solutions to the problems: staff development to learn language, train interpreters, purchase a telephone program that provides interpretation services, and/or have specified dates and times for monolingual patients when a trained medical interpreter is available.

- Calculate how much time is spent on various activities.
  - For example: Calculating the time it takes to complete paperwork at a public clinic.
  - Observation could lead to the following solutions to the problems: Revise forms to a low-literacy level and/or reformatting the forms to be visually friendly (e.g. layout, font size).

- Observe visual appearance of facilities.
  - For example: Are educational materials in multiple languages available? Does the waiting room have enough seats? Are directional signs in multiple languages?
  - Observation could lead to the following solutions to the problems: provide Susan G. Komen® breast health educational materials (e.g. breast self awareness, breast health—what every woman should know) in culturally appropriate languages (e.g. Braille, English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese) and population specific (e.g. African American, Hispanic/Latina, Arabic), link with partners to provide more seating options in the waiting room, and/or purchasing multi-language directional signs.
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- Visually describe situations that informants may be unable or unwilling to share.
  - For example: Receptionist friendlier and welcoming to a privately insured woman versus an public insured woman.
  - Observation could lead to the following solutions to the problems: staff development on cultural competency.

- Experience events that have been described in interviews.
  - For example: Focus groups participants mentioned a community festival that the Komen Affiliate should be at as the attendees are primarily minorities. The Affiliate has not been involved in the event in the past and observes the activities of the event during the current year.
  - Observation could lead to the following solutions to the problems: The information gathered from the observation allows the Affiliate to justify whether or not they will participate in the event the next year.

Advantages of using Observation:
- Enhances the triangulation of data collected by other methods. Triangulation is a process that uses multiple data collection methods to draw conclusions about the data and is discussed in further detail in Module 5.
- Allows for detailed description of situations or events explained by informants
- Provides opportunities for viewing unscheduled events
- Records information as it occurs in a setting

Disadvantages of using Observation:
- Observer bias can skew the data
- Limited availability of sites and situations where access is allowed, or appropriate
- Acceptance of observer in the community or setting that can result in discomfort, “outsider” label, and trust issues)
- Time Consuming

Planning and Conducting an Observation

Prior to selecting observations as a data collection method, the Community Profile Team should have reviewed the quantitative data and the health system analysis, determined the questions to be answered and defined the target population. The demographic and statistical data narrowed the Affiliate service area to targeted areas. Both the quantitative and Health Systems Analysis informed the Affiliate Community Profile Team on potential observation sites.
Develop Data Collection Tools:
An observer should have a sense of purpose and a question or two that they are looking to answer during the observation session1. The observer can be guided by using an observation form. The observation form should contain at least the following information: setting, name of observer, date and time of observation, length of observation, purpose of the observation (e.g. questions that need answered), brief description of the setting, sketch of the setting (if possible), description section, and reflective notes (insights, hunches, themes) to assist the observer in taking notes. This will also ensure that information needed by the Affiliate Community Health Team is not missed. An example of an observation form is available in the Qualitative Data Toolkit on myKomen.org.

Select Sampling Technique:
Selection of the settings in which observation should occur will be determined from the data (e.g. quantitative, Health System Analysis, and qualitative data) and the questions that the team wants this method to answer. Generally, observations should be conducted where the target population often go in their daily lives or engage in the activity of interest2. Common sampling techniques for observation site selection are convenience (e.g. those that are easy to access) and purposive (e.g. sites chosen by the team based on specific characteristics).

Determine Sample Size:
The number of sites to be observed will depend on the sampling technique used and the number of sites available. Depending on the availability of sites, the team may decide to perform an observation of a rural mammography clinic, suburban mammography clinic and an urban mammography clinic.

Using Incentives to Increase Participation:
Incentives are usually not utilized.

Collecting the Data:
The Affiliate Community Profile Team needs to recruit an individual to conduct the observation session(s). An observer should be able to blend into the setting that is being observed, are able to listen attentively, record detailed objective notes, and is interested in the situation (e.g. If an Affiliate wants to observe the mammography process at a local clinic, it would probably be best if the observer was a female at least 40 years of age). In addition, the observer should not interject their own personal experience and biases, and/or should not document in their notes information on how they may do things differently or how they would react in a situation they observe.

Prior to data collection, the Community Profile Team will need to gain permission from the site(s)/organization(s) where the observation will be conducted, unless it is an event that is open to the public (e.g. community health fair). When seeking permission, the Team should provide the site/organization with the purpose of the observation along with the questions that this method is assisting in answering. The team should also provide a tentative date, time frame
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and specify the area that will be observed. The team may want to receive the permission in writing in case that individual is not present on the day the observation is scheduled.

At the start of the observation session, the observer should introduce themselves to the appropriate individuals. The observer should begin the session by scanning and quietly observing the setting. Then, they should alternate between scanning and focusing on an activity of the setting. An observation form that includes a time log can assist in keeping the observer focused on the task at hand as there will likely be other activities that are competing for their attention.

The observer should take as detailed notes as possible during the observation session. The written descriptions need to be factual, accurate and thorough. Notes must avoid judging the participants (e.g. “the woman was anxious waiting for her mammogram”) and relies on what can be seen and known (e.g. “the woman sat in the chair wringing her hands and bouncing her right leg in the mammography waiting room”). It is not possible to observe everything; therefore, the observer should scan the area and then focus on specific activity that is occurring. It may be helpful to also track the time by noting time beside the descriptions (e.g. 11:29 a.m. woman checks-in at window…..12:14 p.m. woman called back for her mammogram”).

Immediately after the observation session, the observer should review and add additional recollections from the session that was not included in the initial notes. The more time that passes between the observation session and the review, the more difficult it may be to recall the situation. When adding additional notes, the observer can add their own impressions and questions without drawing conclusions about motivation. An observer cannot observe why someone does something; they can only observe what they do. They only way to get the why is to conduct an interview with the individual in which the observer can ask them their motivation behind what they did.

Tips for Collecting Useful Observation Data:

- Actively observe - attending to details that you want to observe
- Be unobtrusive in dress and actions
- Become familiar with the setting before beginning to collect data
- Keep observations short at first to keep from becoming overwhelmed
- Pay attention, shifting from wide to a narrow perspective (e.g. focus on a single person/activity/interaction then returning to a view of the overall situation)
- Record key words in conversations to trigger later recollection
- Look at the interactions occurring in the setting, including who talks to whom, whose opinions are respected, how decisions are made, where participants stand or sit (particularly those with decision-making power versus those with less power)
- Counting persons or incidents of observed activity is useful
- Keep an observation record in order in which the activities occur
- Draw a map of the setting to assist in visualization of notes
- Use exact quotes when possible
- No video recording
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What to Document When Conducting an Observation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Includes</th>
<th>What Should Be Noted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Signage; visual appearance of facility; educational materials; advertisements; ambiance</td>
<td>Signage language(s); educational material topics and languages; condition of floors; condition of furniture; type of background music; lighting; types of booths at an event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal behavior and interactions</td>
<td>Who speaks with whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; languages or dialects spoken; tone of voice</td>
<td>Gender, age, ethnicity and profession of speakers; dynamics of interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical behavior and gestures</td>
<td>What people do; who does what; who interacts with whom; who is not interacting</td>
<td>How people use their bodies and voices to communicate different emotions; what individuals’ behaviors indicate about their feelings toward one another; their social rank or their profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal space</td>
<td>How close people stand to one another</td>
<td>What are individuals’ preferences concerning personal space suggest about their relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human traffic flow</td>
<td>People who enter, leave and spend time at the observation site</td>
<td>Where people enter and exit; how long they stay; who they are (ethnicity, age, gender); whether they are alone or accompanied; number of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who stand out</td>
<td>Identification of people who receive a lot of attention from others</td>
<td>The characteristics of these individuals; what differentiates them from others; whether people consult them or they approach other people; whether they seem to be strangers or well known by others present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Analyzing and Drawing Conclusions About the Data:
Qualitative data analysis involves the coding, analysis and interpretation of themes/categories and descriptions in textual data and determines how they help answer the question(s) identified at the beginning of the process. This part of the qualitative data collection process is highly dependent upon the skills of the Community Profile Team’s qualitative resource. Please refer to Module 4 of the Community Profile Guidebook or Module 4 Toolkit: Data Analysis and Interpretation Section of the Qualitative Toolkit on myKomen.org for additional information on analysis and interpretation.

Sources: