**Tutor Notes**

* **Purpose:** This activity helps to raise awareness of the importance of good observation skills when observing other people by asking students to observe a social situation of their choice. It enables students to practise and develop observation skills, and to share their experiences with other students on their course. It also raises ethical issues associated with the observation of others.
* **Type:** Observational exercise and discussion.
* **Level:** Beginner, intermediate and advanced (the level will be reflected in the standard of observation, presentation and discussion).
* **Duration:** Up to 1 hour individual exercise during independent study and one class session for presentations and discussion.
* **Equipment/materials:** None required.
* **Prerequisite activities:** None.
* **Learning outcome:** By the end of this activity students will have improved their personal observation skills and developed a greater understanding of ethical issues associated with observation.

## The activity

Ask your students to observe a social activity and/or interaction (involving people) that takes place in a familiar environment, something that they encounter almost every day of their lives. When choosing an activity and/or interaction to observe, your students should be mindful and sensitive, paying close attention to ethical issues. For example, observing children or vulnerable people raises a number of important issues and should be avoided by less experienced students (see Activity 88: Conducting research with vulnerable people and Activity 89: Conducting research with children for more information).

Instruct your students to observe from a distance, so that they cannot hear what is being said (if people are talking). They can take written notes if they wish, but they must not use any recording device (such as mobile phones). Ask them to observe carefully and notice what is happening, without judgement, interpretation or analysis.

Tell your students that they will need to return to your next session ready to describe to other students, in as much detail as possible, what they have observed. Remind them that they should only describe what they have seen and should not analyse or interpret their observations. Once every student has described their observations you can move on to a class discussion (see ‘key issues’, below, for useful discussion points).

## Key issues

This activity can raise the following issues (depending on level and subject of study):

* understanding the importance of setting aside preconceptions, personal judgement and personal bias when observing (observation can be subject to observer bias);
* observing body language such as eye contact, posture and gesture;
* undertaking unobtrusive or covert observation (making observations while other people are unaware that you are doing so, and the ethical implications attached to this);
* the effect of observing and how this can change the behaviour of those being observed (when they know they are being observed);
* understanding the types of social interaction, symbols and meanings that are being observed;
* understanding the importance of reflecting on what has been observed;
* using other types of observation (participant observation and observing with all the senses rather than purely sight, for example: more information about different types of observation is provided in Activity 45: Using observation techniques);
* observation techniques from different theoretical and methodological perspectives (a realist perspective that suggests there is a real world to observe, experimental research that manipulates and contrives in a systematic way or naturalistic observations and narrative approaches that tell a story, for example);
* understanding the meaning of observations and knowing how to interpret and analyse them (for more advanced students this can include an introduction to theoretical perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics; see Activity 95).