

Observational methods in psychological research: Insights from developmental and psychotherapy research

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1 ECTS

Summary Observation is an essential method that has been used since the early days of empirical research in psychology and psychiatry to identify critical behaviors related to individuals' psychological functioning. Indeed, it allows to collect data that escapes the subjectivity of the subjects and provides complementary information to data collected with other methods, i.e. self-reports, interviews, or physiological measures. Observation is particularly relevant when it comes to understanding relational phenomena, such as the quality of interactions between two or more individuals, and how these phenomena relate to other area of functioning in these individuals. The objective of this course is to introduce students to the use of observation methods and the methodological principles that underlie them, e.g. level of analysis (micro- vs macro-analysis) and granularity (global rating scales vs moment-to-moment coding), distinction between observation and interpretation, inter-rater reliability. We will rely on examples of validated instruments designed to assess interactive processes in the field of developmental psychology (parent-child relationships) and psychotherapy research (patient-therapist relationships).

Course level Introductory

Content of course sessions and dates **Session 1 (14 April 2026, 8.15-12 AM) : Methodological considerations**
- Why use observation?
- Situations or context of observation:

- Observation in the lab: controlled/structured observation
- Naturalistic observations

- Measurement/assessment

- Operationalization
- Level of analysis: micro- vs macro-analysis
- Granularity: global rating scales vs moment-to-moment coding
- Interrater reliability
- Recent advances: coding with AI

Session 2 (21 April 2026, 8.15-12 AM): Observation in developmental research

- Observation in developmental research: General principles
- History of observation in developmental research
- Attachment and the "Strange Situation" (Ainsworth et al., 1978)
- The violation of infant expectations about relationships: the "Still-Face Experiment" (Tronick et al., 1978)
- Emotions as messages: the "Visual Cliff Experiment" (Gibson & Walk, 1960)
- Studies of parent-infant interactive synchrony

- Assessing parental sensitivity and infant cooperation during parent-infant free play: the Child-Adult Relationship Index (CARE-Index; Crittenden, 2006-2010)
- Assessing family coordination during a semi-structured task with the Family Alliance Assessment Scales (FAAS; Favez et al., 2011)

Session 3 (28 April 2026, 8.15-12 AM): Observation in psychotherapy research

- Observing patient-therapist interactive behaviors: General principles
- Observing the therapeutic alliance as a global phenomenon: the Segmented Working Alliance Inventory – Observer (SWAIO; Berk et al., 2013)
- Dynamic observation of alliance ruptures and repairs during psychotherapy sessions: The Rupture-Resolution Rating System (3RS; Eubanks et al., 2019)
- Emotional change in the course of psychotherapy: The Classification of Affective Meaning States (CAMS; Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2005)
- Conclusion of the course
- Instructions for the evaluation

Course materials

Find the documents (including papers and instruments)

- go to "<https://moodle2.unil.ch>"
- log in with your institutional address (unil, chuv, epfl)
- click on "[Faculté de Biologie et de Médecine](#)" > "[Ecole doctorale / doctoral school](#)" > "[Lemanic Neuroscience Doctoral School](#)"
- course materials and papers will be stored under "Observational methods in psychological research"

Readings

Session 1:

Barker, C., Pistrang, N., & Elliott, R. (2015). Observation. In C. Barker, N. Pistrang, & R. Elliott (Eds.), *Research Methods in Clinical Psychology: An Introduction for Students and Practitioners* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Ten Hove, D., Jorgensen, T. D., & van der Ark, L. A. (2022). Updated guidelines on selecting an intraclass correlation coefficient for interrater reliability, with applications to incomplete observational designs. *Psychological Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/met0000516>

Session 2:

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Erlbaum.

Tronick, E., Als, H., Adamson, L., Wise, S., & Brazelton, T. B. (1978). The infant's response to entrapment between contradictory messages in face-to-face interaction. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 17(1), 1. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138\(09\)62273-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138(09)62273-1)

Striano, T., Henning, A., & Stahl, D. (2006). Sensitivity to interpersonal timing at 3 and 6 months of age. *Interaction Studies*, v.7, 2, 251-271 (2006), 7. <https://doi.org/10.1075/is.7.2.08str>

Feldman, R. (2003). Infant–mother and infant–father synchrony: The coregulation of positive arousal. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 24(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.10041>

Crittenden, P. M. (2006-2010). *Care-Index infants coding manual*. Family Relations Institute.

Favez, N., Scaiola, C. L., Tissot, H., Darwiche, J., & Frascarolo, F. (2011). The Family Alliance Assessment Scales: Steps Toward Validity and Reliability of an Observational Assessment Tool for Early Family Interactions. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-010-9374-7>

Session 3:

Eubanks, C. F., Lubitz, J., Muran, J. C., & Safran, J. D. (2019). Rupture Resolution Rating System (3RS): Development and validation. *Psychother Res*, 29(3), 306–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2018.1552034>

Berk, E. A., Safran, J. D., Muran, J. C., & Eubanks-Carter, C. (2010). *Unpublished Manual for the Segmented Working Alliance Inventory Observer Based Measure (S-WAI-O)*.

Pascual-Leone, A., & Greenberg, L. S. (2005). Classification of Affective-Meaning States. In A. Pascual-Leone (Ed.), *Emotional processing in the therapeutic hour: Why "The only way out is through"* (pp. 289–366).

Pascual-Leone, A. (2009). Dynamic emotional processing in experiential therapy: two steps forward, one step back. *J Consult Clin Psychol*, 77(1), 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014488>

Location	Salle Bovet, 5e étage, Consultation de Chauderon , Place Chauderon 18, 1003 Lausanne.
Evaluation	Participants are expected to attend all course sessions and actively engage in discussions. They will be required to write a short paper (2-5 pages) outlining how they would integrate observational measures into their own research project, including the methodological decisions they would make. This includes choosing between an existing instrument (and which one) or creating a new one, determining the context of observation, and developing a coding strategy, among other considerations.
Registration	The course is limited to 12 participants. Register until 15 March 2026 by writing a mail to Indscourses@gmail.com (with your supervisor in copy) and stating the course title as subject.