

Research Methods in Psychology

Observational Research



What We Will Cover in This Section

- Overview.
- Types.
- Analysis.
- Finish.



Overview

- Techniques that permit us to describe and explain behavior.
- Typically call for observing behavior and recording events.
- Usually a preliminary approach to a new area.



General Issues

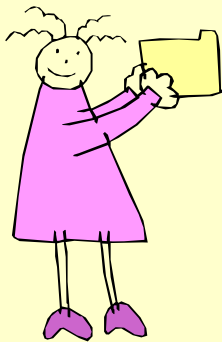
- Choosing the sample
 - What person?
 - What time?
 - What setting/event?
- Problem of control.
 - Naturally occurring events.
 - Extraneous variables.

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Techniques

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1A. Naturalistic Observation

Study method in which the researcher looks at and records behavior in a natural setting with no attempt to influence behavior.

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1B. Participant Observation

Study method in which the researcher participates in the group while recording its behavior.



1B. Participant Observation

A. Active Participation

Researcher is actively engaged in the group's activities.

B. Passive Participation

Researcher is known to the participants but does not become engaged in their activities.



Participant Observation: Comment

- Best used with an isolated group.
- Good for gaining a direct understanding of group dynamics.



Advantages and Comments

- Identify relevant variables and possible environmental influences on behavior.
- Capture fleeting events.
- No need to rely on others' memories.
- Record behavior in risky or dangerous situations.
- Explore the generalizability of laboratory findings.

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Issues and Problems

- Biases.
 - Selective attention.
- Record keeping.
 - Instrument decay.
- Reactivity.
 - Experimenter.
 - Participant.
- Gaining access.
- Ethics.
 - Invasion of privacy.
 - Confidentiality.
- Typicality of the group.

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Case Study

An intense, longitudinal observation of a single individual.

- Usually the subject is extremely unusual.
- Provides in-depth data.

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Archival Research

Gathering information from existing records.

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Advantages

- Permits unobtrusive data collection.
 - Minimizes reactivity.
- Collect data from people who might not otherwise be available.
- Permits retrospective research and data collection.
- Minimal ethical issues.
- Minimal expense.
- Permits easy reanalysis.

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Issues

- Records keeper.
 - Reliability (instrument decay).
 - Biases.
- Access to documents.
- What are you measuring?
- Aggregating data.

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Physical Trace

Research conducted by looking at the artifacts of behavior.



Benefits & Issues

- Benefits
 - Unobtrusive.
 - Few ethical concerns.
 - Minimal expense.
- Issues
 - How to infer motives?
 - What does it mean?





Analysis Techniques



Content Analysis

A qualitative technique used to categorize a wide variety of open-ended behaviors.

Methods for categorizing behavior and communication content based on the frequency of occurrence of ideas, words, topics, activities, etc.

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A priori vs. *Ad hoc* Approach

- *A priori*
 - Based on pre-existing categories.
- *Benefit.*
 - Reliability.
 - Validity.
 - Compare to others.
- *Problem.*
 - Restrictive.
- *Ad hoc*
 - Developed on the fly.
- *Benefits.*
 - New situations.
 - Categories to fit all behaviors.
- *Problem.*
 - Interpretation with unique categories.
 - Categories may be unique to the sample.

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Categorization Issues #2

- **Broad vs. Narrow Focus**
 - All behaviors vs. smaller, pre-defined subset.
- **Number of Coding Categories**
 - Fewer independent categories is gooder.
- **What decisions are needed from the data.**

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Categorization Issues #3

- What is the unit of analysis for relevant behaviors.
 - “People should be given fair compensation” vs. “Dental coverage should include false teeth”
- Concurrent vs. After-the-fact coding.



Rules for Effective Coding

1. All terms must be clearly defined.
2. There should be a category for every behavior that you choose to observe.
3. A behavior should fit into only one category.



The End