Research Methods (RES 800)

Observational Research



7/10/2006

RES800 Observational Research

What We Will Cover in This Section Overview. Types. Analysis.

Overview

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- 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.

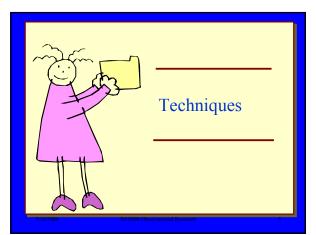
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General Issues

- Choosing the sample (Who).
- Choosing the setting (Where).
- Problem of control.
 - Naturally occurring events.
 - Extraneous variables.
- · How to code the data.

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1. 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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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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2. Participant Observation

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



Participant Observation

Active Participation

Researcher is actively engaged in the group's activities.

Passive Participation

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



Advantages

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

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Issues

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



3. Case Study

Intense observation of a single individual over an extended period of time.

- Usually done because the individual is unique.
- Limited to a one or two people.
- Usually done over a long time period.



Issues and Advantages

- Issues
 - Limited generalizability.
 - Reactivity.
 - Time consuming.
 - What to document?
- · Advantages.
 - See all variables.
 - See changes over time.
 - May see behavior in context.

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4. Archival Research

Gathering information from existing records.



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.

Issues

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

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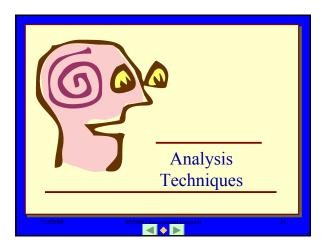
5. Physical Trace

Research conducted by looking at the physical traces of behavior.



Benefits & Issues

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



A priori vs. Ad hoc Approach

- · A priori
 - Based on preexisting 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.



Rules for Effective Coding

- 1. All terms must be clearly defined.
- 2. There should be a category for every behavior.
- 3. A behavior should fit into only one category.



Content Analysis

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

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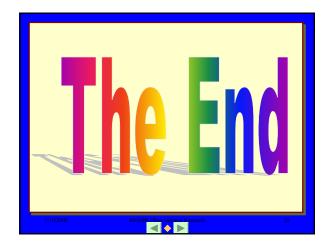
Content Analysis: Issues

- Issues
 - Judges must be consistent.
 - Specific topics must be well defined.
 - Good sampling
 - Researcher is at mercy of records keeper (biases, thoroughness).
 - Have important details been noted?



Homework

Stop Sign Compliance Study



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