

Research Methods (RES 800)

Observational Research



What We Will Cover in This Section

- Overview.
- Types.
- Analysis.



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

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Techniques

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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.

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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.

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Advantages

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



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.

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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.



5. Physical Trace


Research conducted by looking at the physical traces of behavior.



Benefits & Issues

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Benefits<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Unobtrusive.– Few ethical concerns.– Minimal expense. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Issues<ul style="list-style-type: none">– How to infer motives?– What does it mean? |
|---|--|





Analysis Techniques

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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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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.

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Content Analysis

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



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



