

INTERVIEWING AND OBSERVATION

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Summary

We all observe the social world to guide our actions, and to react to other people. Psychologists' observations differ from those of lay people; they are purposeful and systematic. Almost all psychologists observe human behavior, but for some "observation" refers to a systematic way of collecting data. As is always the case in research, psychologists need to resolve important ethical issues before they can embark on any project that requires them to observe the behavior of other people. Observation is most commonly used in field settings, with such strategies as the street theater and

accounting paradigm. The operationalization of the behavior and the specification of the details of the methods to be used are important tasks that need to be completed in preparation for behavioral observation.

The interview is used widely in psychology as a data collection tool, essentially when the relevant information cannot be observed directly or be obtained easily by means of psychometric tests or questionnaires. The social survey is probably the best-known form of interview, although focus groups now often provide the context within which social surveys are conducted. While the survey is fairly regimented, and typically follows a strict order of presentation of the interview questions, focus groups involve carefully planned discussions. The interview is also the oldest data collection method used by mental health practitioners, although its nature and form have changed across time. In industrial and organizational contexts interviews are widely used for selection purposes. Recent research attention has focused on improving interviews with children.

Whatever the purpose, interviews constitute a form of skilled activity, for which training is required. The skills can be taught effectively within relatively short periods. The scientific adequacy of observation and interviewing is determined as for other assessment methods, that is, via their reliability and validity.

1. Introduction

To carry out research effectively, investigators must have a clear idea about the purpose of their investigation. Different research purposes require different strategies. Although methodological issues are sometimes dealt with in the abstract, they are inextricably intertwined with the theoretical and substantive issues involved in any research undertaking.

The emphasis that psychology has given to empirical data has been one of its major strengths. It has, however, also been a source of many controversies. Important debates in psychology often focus on whether the data from a particular study have been reliably and validly collected, appropriately analyzed, and correctly interpreted. The importance of these issues is perhaps nowhere more intensely debated than when observation and interviewing are the methodologies used for data collection.

2. Observation

All of us, whatever society we live in, are constantly making observations of the social world around us. Such observations guide our own actions, and they shape our reactions to the behavior of other people with whom we interact. They also generate the body of information that is shared by lay people and that is often referred to as commonsense or cultural knowledge.

Psychologists are concerned with human behavior. Their investigations often require them to observe the behavior of humans. Sometimes the observations are of gross behaviors (for example, friendly interactions among children in the school playground). At other times, psychologists' observations are undertaken in a laboratory setting and focus on smaller units of behavior (for example, the speed with which people recognize

a word that is presented on a video screen). Whatever their nature or purpose, however, the observations made by psychologists differ from those we make in our everyday lives in two important respects. First, psychologists' observations are purposive. They are prompted by a desire to shed light on specific research questions. Although sometimes that might involve the description or classification of a phenomenon, more often the goal is to confirm hypotheses. Despite their diverse intellectual traditions and aims, psychologists who use observation rarely begin with the vague musings of lay people, and instead usually approach their problems with a fairly specific research question. A second important feature of psychologists' observations is their systematic nature. While there are different viewpoints about the desirability of standardizing observational procedures, psychologists nevertheless make considered decisions about the way they will undertake their observations. Some psychologists, typically those who employ qualitative methodologies, impose minimum restrictions and controls. Others identify with great specificity the behavioral categories that are to be observed, and derive elaborate sampling and coding systems that will allow them to do so. The principal strength of the first approach is that it avoids any interference with the natural sequence of behavior. In general, however, psychologists often feel more confident about their conclusions when they have exercised some degree of control over the data collection process. Furthermore, to the extent that details are provided about the way a study has been undertaken, replication is possible. The latter is generally agreed to be an important consideration among psychologists.

2.1. Systematic Observation

While almost all psychologists are engaged in the observation of human behavior in the more general sense referred to above, for a subset of psychologists the term "observation" has a specific meaning, and refers to a systematic way of collecting data.

The direct observation of behavior was a fundamental component of behavior analysis and assessment. Because of the concerns that self-report methods [i] provide only indirect measures of observable behavior, [ii] are beset with potential biases of social desirability, and [iii] are susceptible to faking, the assessment of overt behavior was the mainstay of behaviorists, at least in the early years.

The direct observation of behavior is now used more extensively, and many psychologists regard behavioral observation as an effective way to gather ecologically valid information on behavior. One of the hallmarks of observation has traditionally been its non-interventionism. Observers do not ask their subjects specific research questions, and they generally do not pose tasks for them, at least not in the way that their psychologist peers might do who collect their data in a laboratory. Observation is used widely in social psychology, clinical psychology, and in developmental psychology. Often such studies are conducted in the field, in public places, or are studies of the family, especially of marital and parent-child interactions. Those investigators are typically interested in comparatively molar (i.e. referring to the behavior of the masses), and naturally occurring behavior, and sometimes they are concerned with how some behavior varies over time, or in relation to different environmental conditions.

When psychologists want to study and to predict behavior, particularly behavior in natural settings, this purpose is generally best served by the direct observation and measurement of the behavior. This is because under certain circumstances, all of us, not only participants in psychological research, feel inhibited and are reluctant to be open and frank when talking about ourselves to another person. This is especially so when there is a socially desirable or correct response to a particular question. Furthermore, these psychologists often use unobtrusive observation (that is, subjects are unaware that their behavior is being observed by another person), because there is extensive evidence that the behavior of individuals can be distorted simply through the knowledge that they are serving as experimental subjects.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

Before outlining the specific procedures in more detail, we will consider the ethical issues that researchers confront when they employ these procedures, and how those issues need to be resolved. First, it is obviously important, wherever possible, to ask subjects to agree to being observed, even if they cannot be told the specific times when observations will occur. Sometimes it is possible to have participants as observers; obviously they must be trained to carry out the observations carefully and accurately. Sometimes, however, observations need to be undertaken without the prior knowledge of those who are being observed. Researchers who use such observations must therefore be able to justify their observations, as the methodological procedure of choice, and be prepared to justify undertaking them without first gaining the consent of those whose behavior they are about to observe. In order to reconcile this problem, researchers must be convinced about two issues. They should be confident (and need to be able to convince others in the scientific and lay communities) of the value of the research. In other words, the benefits of the research must clearly outweigh these concerns. Second, the researchers must be convinced, having given careful thought to alternative methodologies, that the proposed approach is the optimal method for the study, and that no other methodology would yield equally valuable data to address their research question.

2.3. Strategies Used in Field Settings

Having given careful thought to those considerations, two principal approaches might be used to recruit subjects for unobtrusive observation, at least for studies in field settings. They are the street theater and the accosting strategies. The goal of the street theater strategy is to create the event of interest in such a way that everyone in the surrounding area notices. Obviously, it is critical that this is done in such a way that no person is at risk of any harm or injury. In the accosting strategy, a specific person is selected as the participant or subject. In this case, it is crucial to ensure that the intervention (whatever is said to, or expected of the person) is plausible, and that the person chosen as the subject produces a response without any prompting or help from anyone. In both strategies, researchers typically compare responders and non-responders to the intervention (for example, those who go to assist a person in need versus those who do not). An important methodological control, therefore, is to ensure that the number of potential subjects or responders is the same in each condition (for example, if interested in the differences in help-giving behavior between people doing their

shopping in a mall and those at an environmental meeting, equal numbers must be observed at the two venues), that the composition of the sample remains constant throughout the study, and that the duration of data-collecting sequence is identical for each of the conditions.

2.4. Operationalization of Behavioral Observation

Before we embark on a study involving observation, there are some preliminary, but important decisions that need to be made. These relate to the selection of the behavior, its definition, and the specific dimensions of the behavior that are to be observed. First, and most obviously, we must be able to identify and agree on the behavior that is to be observed. Second, the behavior must be defined objectively, clearly, and completely, to allow replication. A third decision involves the behavioral dimension or dimensions. We might, for example, be interested in the frequency of occurrence of some behavior, or its duration. On the other hand, the accuracy of responding might be more important. Researchers need to decide which aspects of behavior will be observed, and the way the categories of the behavior are to be ordered. While a simple tally or count (for example, the presence or absence of a behavior) can sometimes be sufficient, for other projects it is often necessary to devise a dependent measure that is scaled in some way, because this allows researchers to determine gradations or levels of the behavior, and to conduct more sophisticated analyses. The next task is to decide on the sample of subjects to be selected for observation, and the period of time they are to be observed. These selections need to be done with careful thought. It is crucial that the participants, the situations, and the time periods are truly representative of the people, the experiences, or events, and of the time about which the researchers want to draw meaningful conclusions.

2.5. Method Specification for Observation

Having decided on the behavior, their specific dimensions, the sample to be observed, and the observation time period, the next series of tasks relate to the data recording system that is to be used. Event recording is efficient and is the simplest, although care must be taken in establishing the appropriate unit of behavior, in order that a simple tally can be made. More information can be gained if the researchers also record environmental events, that is, if other characteristics or associated events are noted. In addition, if more than one observer is recording the information, they can later discuss any disagreements, although they might not always be able to reconcile these if they have made their observations in different parts of the arena. One of the most important decisions then concerns the data recording method. The choice among paper-and-pencil forms, electromechanical methods, and audio- and video-recording devices depends largely on the complexity of the behaviors to be recorded. A critical criterion is system accuracy. Whatever the method, researchers need to ensure accurate recording of the behavior to be observed. Furthermore, the observation setting and the duration must ensure sufficient sampling (for example, when behavior rates are low, the length of time required for recording is obviously longer). In addition, to facilitate the recording of many behaviors and to provide for easier comparison between observers, time periods for observing are sometimes divided into smaller segments or intervals.

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Biographical Sketch

Gail Huon is associate professor in psychology at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Her principal research area is eating disorders. She teaches interviewing and counseling in graduate psychology programs.