Chapter 6: Observing Behavior

Psychology 2301
Introduction to Research Methods
University of Houston
Nonexperimental Research: Observing Behavior
Observational Methods

- Qualitative approaches
  - Verbal summaries
- Quantitative approaches
  - Statistical analysis
  - Preferred method (publication)
Observational Methods

Research Question:
Naturalistic Observation

- Qualitative
- Starting point when little is known
- Used when you want to “describe and understand how people in a social or cultural setting live, work, and experience the setting.”
- The goal is to provide a complete and accurate picture rather than to test a priori hypotheses.
Naturalistic Observation: Research Issues

• Participant vs. Nonparticipant
  – A nonparticipant remains “outside” the group/situation.
  – A participant assumes an insider role
• Issues
  • Depth vs. objectivity
Naturalistic Observation: Research Issues

• Concealed vs. Nonconcealed
  – The researcher will not reveal their research purpose in concealed observation
  – In nonconcealed research the “participants” are aware of the research purposes
  – Issues:
    • Reactivity
    • Ethics
Naturalistic Observation: Research Issues

- The researcher must perform a cost-benefit analysis and determine whether or not to conceal their presence (participant) and/or purpose (concealment).
  - Note: this is a continuum, not discrete categories.
- Researchers must always be aware of their role (and their objectivity).
Limitations of Naturalistic Observation

- It is not useful for studying well defined hypotheses under precisely specified conditions
- Very time consuming
- Difficult to analyze the data

**Don’t bite off more than you can chew**
Systematic Observation

- Careful observation of one or more specific behaviors in a particular setting
- Quantitative
- Prior hypotheses
- Coding system developed to interpret behavior
  - Make as simple as possible (fewer categories) and ensure independence between categories
Systematic Observation: Coding

**Issues**

- Reactivity
- Reliability
  - Use multiple coders to improve reliability (intrarater reliability)
- Sampling
  - Longer time period
Case Study

- A descriptive account of the behavior, past history, and other relevant factors, concerning a specific individual (does not have to be a person)
- Researched because it is an anomaly
- Can be very difficult to conduct
- Generalizability
Archival Research

• The use of existing sources of information for research
• Secondary data (as opposed to primary)
Archival Research: Different Types

- Statistical Records
  - United States Census Bureau
- Survey Archives
  - National Science Foundation
- Written/Mass communication records
  - Diaries, letters, etc.
Archival Research: Analysis

• Content Analysis
  – Like systematic observation, requires a coding scheme
Questions?