Observational Research

PSY 395
Oswald
"Do some observational research at Thanksgiving!"

Naturalness and Generalizability

• One of the best ways of ensuring generalizability is to observe behavior passively (unobtrusively) as it occurs in a natural environment
  – Jane Goodall’s Chimp studies
  – Margaret Mead’s observations on the assertiveness levels of primitive cultures
• Contrast with lab studies

Costs and Benefits

• Costs
  – Coding sheet must be developed for ratings
  – Multiple raters must agree on the coding
  – Hawthorne effects
  – Potential for violation of privacy – informed consent
Costs and Benefits

• Benefits
  – Collection of data that clearly reflects the constraints of the organisms natural environment
  – Natural events as the IV
  – Collection of data where experimental techniques are not practical or ethical (e.g., accidents)
  – Great way to generate ideas for further testing

Observation

• Physical trace methods
  – Assess the behavior (interest, hunger, sadness) after it has been expressed in an opportunistic fashion
  – Erosion measures
    • Examine wear on a material...the more a group likes or needs the material, the more it will be used (e.g., floor tiles)...more people? Stay longer? Kids' scuffing and scuffing?
  – Accretion Measures
    • Examine the selective deposits of materials (e.g., fingerprints)

Observation

• Systematic Observation
  – The standard technique...train observers to record behavior following a systematic coding scheme
  – Structured vs. unstructured observations
  – Know the steps in the book: “Steps in Conducting an Observation”
Observation: Unstructured

- Ethological Observation
  - Unstructured, highly descriptive portrayal of behavior.
  - Goodall’s records of chimp behavior
  - Record details of what’s seen without value judgments (inferring attitudes/intentions)
- Ecological Observation
  - Describing settings: geography, functions, typical objects, typical behaviors, time
  - Constraints/affordances and attunements/abilities

Observation: Structured

- Checklists / Coding Schemes / Category Systems…pretty much the same thing, a systematic way for describing behaviors during observation
- The nature of the checklist can be influenced by the discovery of ‘themes’ in unstructured observations

Archival Research

- The analysis of statistical records to derive inferences
  - Health statistics from hospitals
  - Census data from governments
  - Organizational personnel records
  - Achievement data from schools and ETS
  - Major research studies (NLYS, MTFS)
  - Financial data from Moody’s
  - General Social Survey
Characteristics of Archival Data

- Usually huge databases
- Very messy
  - Not designed for your purpose
  - Missing data
- Majority of time is spent getting data into a useful format
- Ethical Issues?

Verbal and Written Records

- Historians use this method to reconstruct perspectives and events
- Huge reliance on content analysis
- Very susceptible to alternative interpretations
- Public documents, mass media, private documents