

Guidelines to Observational Research

“Essentials of Research Methods in Psychology” A.E. Zechmeister, J. Shaughnessy, Chapter 4

Sampling Behavior

It's generally impossible for most researchers to record all behavior occurring around them all the time. It is important to identify a *sample* that will best represent the answers you seek

- *Time Sampling* – researchers seek representative samples by choosing various time intervals for their observations. Intervals may be selected systematically, randomly, or both (i.e., some exhibits may be empty during the week, but rather crowded on weekends – would want to include both time points to get a better understanding of the draw of the exhibit)
- *Situation Sampling* – used when behavior is observed in many different circumstances, locations, and conditions. By sampling various situations, researchers reduce the change that their observations are unique to the specific circumstances or conditions (i.e., observing animals in the wild vs. observing the same animals in a zoo. Observing school groups that come to a museum vs. observing families that come to a museum). Sampling various situations allows you to vary the subject sample to hopefully better externalize the results from your data
- *Whichever method you choose, you are trying to get a sample that will be most similar to the general population under study so that your sample can be used to represent that population*

More Info about Direct Observational Methods

- *Naturalistic* – the observer will act as a passive recorder of what occurs. The events and behaviors occur naturally without any manipulation from the researcher. The main goals of naturalistic observation are to describe behavior as it ordinarily occurs and to investigate the relationships among variables that are present
- *Participant Observation* – the researcher plays a dual role – they observe people's behavior & participate in a natural setting (i.e., teacher in a classroom, MSI staff that run the 'coal mine')
 - *Undisguised participant observer*
 - *Disguised participant observer*
- *Structured Observation* – often the researcher decides to intervene in order to cause an event to occur or to set up a situation so that events can be more easily recorded (i.e., offer free passes to guests so that they will visit certain exhibits you want to investigate, frequently used by developmental psychologists)
- *Field Experiment* – the researcher manipulates one or more variables in a natural setting in order to determine their effect on behavior.

In any observational research design, be careful of REACTIVITY.

- Reactivity occurs when people react to the fact that they are being observed by changing their normal behavior (Hawthorne effect)
- Research participants pay attention to demand characteristics of the situation and try to alter their behavior accordingly
- Researchers can reduce reactivity by: concealed observer, disguised participant observation, indirect observation, or adapt participant's to observer's presence

Researcher bias can also confound results – systematic errors in observation that result because of the researcher's expectations (i.e., if researchers are trying to argue that a family trip to a museum is a less focused activity than a field trip, the researcher may be 'honing in on' family behavior that seems unfocused or vice versa)