Observational Data Collection Methods for Services Marketing: An Overview

Stephen J. Grove and Raymond P. Fisk

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Stephen J. Grove
Clemson University

Raymond P. Fisk
University of Central Florida

Applications of observational data collection methods to services marketing research are explored. Three key dimensions that distinguish the various forms of observational methods are presented. General applications of observational research to services marketing phenomena are posited. Specific applications of observational research to services quality are suggested. Issues concerning the implementation of direct human observation are considered.

Compared to the emphasis on survey techniques within the marketing discipline, attention to observational data collection methods is relatively rare. During the last decade, cursory homage has been accorded to observational techniques as the marketing discipline has wrestled with questions about the appropriate models of inquiry (e.g., Brinberg and Hirschman 1986; Calder and Tybout 1987; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Hunt 1989). Yet, to date, the distinctive capabilities of observational methodologies for investigating services phenomena have not been widely recognized.

This article examines the broad spectrum of observational methodologies available to services researchers and provides services managers and scholars with a general knowledge of observational techniques. The philosophy of science arguments that characterize many discourses on nontraditional research efforts are purposely avoided. Observational techniques are not exclusively the domain of post-positivistic or interpretivist inquiry, nor are they absent in the domain of positivism. Independent of one's philosophy of science, they encompass a continuum of purposes and activities that can generate interpretive or descriptive information about services. The service phenomena under investigation define the appropriateness of any particular observational technique.

That services are dynamic, experiential processes is well-documented in the marketing literature (Bateson 1989; Shostack 1977; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, and Gutman 1985; Surprenant and Solomon 1987). The airline flight, the visit to the dentist's office, the athletic event, etc. share characteristics of intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and simultaneity of production and consumption (Bateson 1989; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1985). Services exist only while being rendered and are living processes that cannot be disassembled (Shostack and Kingman-Brundage 1991). Hence, services are difficult to investigate through traditional research methodologies (Bateson 1985; Bitner, Nyquist, and Booms 1985; Shostack 1977). Observational methods are well suited to capturing the processual nature of services phenomena due to their ability to examine service interactions unobtrusively as they occur. This is crucial since service quality includes both process and outcome dimensions (Grönroos 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985) and processes are the "raw material" by which services are constructed (Shostack 1987).

With the notable exception of the Critical Incident Technique (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Bitner, Nyquist, and Booms 1985), observational methods have received little attention in the services marketing literature. This is unfortunate since observational techniques offer several benefits to the study of services. They can: (1) complement more traditional methods of data collection (Crano and Brewer 1986; Kidder and Judd 1986; Parasuraman 1991); (2) serve as a means of discovery or hypothesis testing (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Jorgensen 1989); (3) offer an "up-close" view of phenomena (Hirschman 1986; Jorgensen 1989; Miles and Huberman 1984); and (4) provide information about phenomena that are gleaned in their natural set-

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ting (Bogdan and Taylor 1975; Crano and Brewer 1986; Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Jorgenson 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). In short, this form of data gathering offers services researchers an attractive alternative to investigate service phenomena.

The key dimensions that distinguish various forms of observational methods and their potential for studying services phenomena are presented. General applications to services marketing phenomena are examined. A specific application of observational research to services quality is presented. Finally, issues relating to implementing direct human observation in services are discussed.

SOME KEY DIMENSIONS OF OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

In the present context, observational methods refer to data gathering techniques that focus on services experiences as they unfold (e.g., the speed with which service contact personnel process a transaction) or indirect evidence of a service's nature following its performance (e.g., tallying cash register receipts to identify the popularity of menu items at various times of the day). Observational methodologies seek "real world" information and the preservation of the authenticity of the service phenomena's natural state. Even when survey-like instruments are used in this quest, they are normally employed cautiously to avoid contaminating the service encounter. In sum, observational methodologies offer a fundamentally different approach than traditional data gathering techniques for services.

Various forms of observation are available to investigate service phenomena. Each may be distinguished by three key dimensions that characterize how observation is conducted: (1) mode (are observations made by humans or by mechanical device?); (2) directness (is the phenomenon observed as it occurs or are the consequences of the phenomenon noted after the fact?); and (3) concealment (are subjects aware they are being studied or is the observation concealed?). Collectively, these three dimensions help define any particular observational technique's appropriateness for the study of specific services phenomena.

Mode of Observation

One mode of observation involves mechanical devices such as videotaping a service encounter (e.g., filming customer-teller interactions in a bank) or analyzing sales receipts from services exchanges, which rely on technology to record aspects of service delivery. The second mode, human observation, relies on researchers to collect and record (informally or formally) service information. The researchers might be service contact personnel, management, service customers, independent observers, or others whose task is to glean information about some aspect of the service experience. For example, in developing its Fairfield Inns, Marriott sent researchers into the field to experience the strengths and weaknesses of its competitors' lodging designs and used the information in creating the physical environment of its offerings.

Of the two modes of observation, the human-based approach is better suited for identifying the experiential nature of services and/or developing a richer knowledge of service phenomena. By contrast, mechanical observation provides a more permanent and ostensibly less biased account of a service concern.

Directness of Observation

The directness of observation dimension concerns whether it is desirable and/or feasible to study services phenomena as they occur, rather than *ex post facto*. Whether mechanically or humanly recorded, direct observation examines a phenomenon in its natural setting (e.g., investigation of a waiter's acumen as table service is delivered or employing "secret flyers" to observe an airline's service as it occurs). The advantage of direct observation is the assessment of the actual phenomenon rather than a reconstruction or contrived rendition of it. Unfortunately, direct observation can be costly, time consuming, and sometimes infeasible. When these limitations are present, indirect observation may be advisable.

Indirect observation assesses a phenomenon by attending to its consequences. For example, instead of tallying the number of people using various information kiosks in a mall to discern their popularity, the degree of wear on the carpet/floor tiles in front of the structures could be tallied. Such physical trace analysis is quite nonreactive (Sechrest 1979; Webb et al. 1966); since the immediate presence of a researcher is not required, little opportunity to bias or affect a subject's behavior exists. A significant problem associated with indirect observation, however, is the limit to what can be assessed *ex post facto*. For instance, it is difficult to surmise the experiential quality of a service through indirect observation, since one must rely on subject recall or perhaps trace analysis for its evidence.

Concealment of Observation

Concealment of observation relates to whether research subjects are apprised of the fact they are being investigated. There is a critical trade-off in choosing to conceal observation. While less reactive, concealed observation raises ethical concerns. Unconcealed observation reduces concern over the research's ethical nature but is more obtrusive, perhaps upsetting the "naturalness" of the phenomenon under investigation. Recognizing that unconcealed observation could affect the validity of their observations, a recent study of salespeople's approach skills used researchers disguised as shoppers to collect data (McClung, Grove, and Hughes 1989). By contrast, an observational study of buyers and sellers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) disclosed researcher identities while attending to numerous checks to ensure the data's trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Both concealed and unconcealed observations may be made via human or mechanical means. However, under conditions of concealment either may represent an invasion of subjects' privacy. Fortunately, most services topics are not likely to be personally compromising for the service employees, customers, etc. Furthermore, concealing observation can reduce the risk of "unnatural" subject behavior.

When unconcealed, such well-known subject responses to observation as the "Hawthorne Effect" (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939) or the "Rosenthal Effect" (Rosenthal 1966) may occur. The former involves subjects who know they are being observed acting in an unnatural manner, whereas the latter involves observers unknowingly emitting cues about desired responses. To glean the most accurate information about a service, it is desirable, if ethically permissible, to employ a concealed observational approach.

The Ethics of Concealed Observation

Ethical issues associated with concealed observation are a serious concern and discussion of concealed observation without attention to them would be incomplete (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Hirschman 1986; Jorgensen 1989; Marshall and Rossman 1989). Observing people without their knowledge of the activity may violate their rights to privacy, confidentiality, and freedom from exploitation (Jorgensen 1989). The potential for such occurrences may vary, depending on the nature of the observation itself. For instance, the services researcher who observes subjects at a distance (e.g., watches an encounter between a waitress and a customer) is less likely to be ethically culpable than the one who completely immerses him/herself in the study's social milieu (e.g., takes on the identity of a bank clerk to gain information about the nature of this boundary-spanning role).

Clandestinely observing illegal or immoral phenomena compounds the ethicality issue. However, since most services are unlikely to involve aberrant or severely compromising behavior, their potential to exacerbate the ethical issue is diminished. Furthermore, services are often performed in public settings where people are casual observers of fellow customers or workers. Hence, a concealed observer may have no more of an ethical obligation to the service participant than one would have in everyday life circumstances (Jorgensen 1989).

While there are no hard and fast rules for evaluating the ethicality of concealed observational research, a general assessment should consider the real or likely responses to the information so gathered. Every research plan "must be able to justify itself to the members of the scientific community as well as to those involved in the study" (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975, p. 12). Though the services researcher may act with responsibility and awareness of complex ethical issues, his/her investigation may pose direct and indirect ethical consequences by virtue of his/her presence within the service encounter and/or the effects of his/her findings. To assuage some of this culpability, a study's results must stand up to close inspection by the service participants and the scrutiny of others capable of evaluating the research. Since concealed observation represents an unannounced intrusion into others' fields of behavior, services researchers must be sensitive to its ethical ramifications.

GENERAL APPLICATIONS OF OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH TO SERVICES MARKETING PHENOMENA

Observational research may be conducted on a wide range of services marketing phenomena. To facilitate one's appreciation of observational methods' potential contribution to understanding services marketing phenomena, the service process can be described in three stages: inputs, throughputs, and outcomes. The first stage requires both consumer and organization inputs. Consumer inputs consist of mental (perceptions, attitudes, expectations, etc.) and physical (hunger, thirst, etc.) states that the consumer brings to the service experience. Organization inputs consist of activities of the organization necessary to prepare for the service experience. The throughputs stage is the service experience itself and is shared by the consumer and the organization. The outcomes stage refers to the results from the service encounter derived by both parties, such as a change in consumers' mental and physical states or the organization's financial and nonfinancial positions. Observational research may be employed to explore phenomena at each stage of the service process.

Inputs Stage

Observational methods can be used at the inputs stage of the service process to study consumers before their participation in the service encounter. Such observation is likely to take place in the subjects' domain rather than the organization's. Both concealed and unconcealed observations face substantial problems in this context. For example, concealed observation of consumers in their homes would be a significant invasion of privacy, whereas, as a practical matter, unconcealed observation of individuals as they prepare to purchase a service may be difficult. Nevertheless, various forms of participant and nonparticipant observation might be used to uncover factors affecting consumers' problem recognition and decision processes. For instance, advertising agencies Young & Rubicam and Saatchi & Saatchi have sent researchers into consumers' homes to observe behavioral patterns for their clients. However, such research efforts may require high costs (e.g., effort to gain entry, time to establish rapport, credibility, etc.) and traditional surveys may be better suited to investigate prepurchase attitudes, intentions, etc. of service consumers.

Observation of service organizations preparing to deliver a service is more practical. A wide range of direct human or mechanical observational methods are available at the inputs stage and are likely to involve observation of employees and managers as they prepare to deliver a service. Such observation might explore aspects of the "backstage" (Grove and Fisk 1990) or "invisible" portion (Eiglier and Langeard 1977) of the service system. Video recording of service workers' rehearsal, participant observation of planning and preparation for the service delivery, and content analysis of codified training procedures are all examples of ways that observational methods may be used at the input stage.

Throughputs Stage

Observational methods are especially well suited for researching the throughputs stage of the service process. Our contention is that since direct human observation offers the greatest potential for investigating the service experience, more attention is devoted to it in our discussion. Direct

human observation involves one or more researchers collecting data about a service phenomenon as it occurs. A rationale for employing this form of observation is that a richer, more intimate, and possibly more accurate understanding is derived by investigating a service first-hand.

Issues arising from direct human observation of service throughputs include decisions regarding concealment, researcher participation, and structure of the observations. Concealing observation of the service experience rather than disclosing it ensures less biased responses since subjects who know they are being observed are likely to behave in an unnatural manner. Service workers who realize the manager is watching their actions are likely to make greater efforts to perform satisfactorily. Also, if the wish is to identify problem areas in service delivery, it may be best to disguise the observation. Walt Disney Co. routinely hires professionals to shop its parks and rate its stores, amusements, personnel, etc., all under a condition of concealment to protect against "unnatural" respondent behavior (Meister 1990). While it is possible to disclose observation and derive valid results, such a likelihood depends on putting the subjects at ease and establishing rapport over an extended period of time (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Hirschman 1986). The difficulty of establishing rapport often makes disguised observation more attractive.

Another decision is whether to observe the service experience as a participant or observe from a distance. Participant observation is "characterized by a period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subject in the milieu of the latter" (Blumer 1969, p. 3). If the research objective is "thick data"—information that goes beyond facts and appearance to a deeper understanding of the context, details, and emotional aspects of behavior—then participant observation is desirable. The observer as a service participant can unmask or discover dimensions of the service experience unlikely to be discerned by a distant or nonparticipant observer. In training their managers to understand the special problems facing contact personnel, some service organizations such as Avis require managers to spend time laboring as a contact worker. Various adaptations of direct human observation ranging from one in which the researcher is a complete participant to one where the researcher is a complete observer exist (Marshall and Rossman 1989). If the goal is to make inferences about services, participant observation is desirable, while nonparticipant observation is probably best when the goal is surface information or factual accounts of the service phenomena.

A third decision concerning direct human observation involves the degree of structure given to the investigation. Research observations may range from unstructured and impressionistic to structured and systematic (Jorgensen 1989; Kidder and Judd 1986; Parasuraman 1991). Unstructured observation is more informal and marked by the researcher approaching the subject with few preconceived ideas and restrictions. Such flexibility offers one the opportunity to shift focus, pursue emergent aspects of the phenomenon, and investigate a variety of issues. In fact, information evaluation may occur as data are collected (Denzin 1989). Furthermore, unstructured observation may vary in intensity, from the gleaning of simple insights through casual contact with the phenomenon to a deeply involving observational method designed to promote profound understanding. Unstructured observation is particularly useful as a "means of discovery" for insights into services phenomena and may generate important hypotheses about the throughputs stage. In its simplest form, unstructured research might take the form of "Management By Wandering Around" (MBWA) or "naive listening." Service organizations, such as Marriott and American Airlines, rely on such methods to identify gaps and monitor service quality (Clist 1985; Crosby 1985).

In contrast, structured observation is systematic, formal, and guided by a narrower purpose. In special circumstances, it can serve as a "means of justification" by providing information gathered to test hypotheses about service phenomena. In extreme form, structured observation reflects a less interpretative and more positivistic mode of inquiry that stresses quantifiable data. To accomplish this, a systematic research plan is established to facilitate categorization of observations, while carefully trained researchers are given checklists and codes to record behavioral responses accurately (Crano and Brewer 1986; Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Jorgensen 1989; Kidder and Judd 1986). An example of structured observation in services is the use of "mystery" shoppers to gather specific information about service performance in everyday conditions. Fast food chains such as McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Domino's Pizza use such research to monitor the quality of their service. When fully implemented, structured observation may generate conclusions and assess the accuracy of service relationships identified through unstructured observation.

In sum, there are many ways to combine the direct human observation elements of concealment, participation, and structure for investigating service throughputs. While direct human observation seems best suited, meaningful information may be gleaned through other observational techniques as well. For instance, indirect observation (e.g., the Critical Incident Technique or CIT) or mechanical observation (e.g., video recording) also might identify key aspects of the service process. However, neither of these captures the processual nature of services as well as direct human observation, nor are they as externally valid.

Outcomes Stage

At the outcomes stage of the service process, indirect observation of consumers, employees, and managers can be used to learn more about the service that was delivered. Indirect observation involves drawing inferences about the service experience based on participants' recollections, organizational records, etc. Compared to either direct human or mechanical observation, issues of concealment or disclosure are less relevant in this context.

A promising indirect observational technique for services marketing is the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954), introduced to the services marketing literature by Bitner, Nyquist, and Booms (1985). The CIT uses in-depth interviews with customers or employees to assess specific instances of services experiences that were especially satisfying or dissatisfying. A recent CIT study of airline, hotel,

and restaurant services resulted in an extensive classification of critical incidents affecting customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990).

To investigate the organization side of the outcomes stage, physical trace analysis (Webb et al. 1966) can be used to ascertain evidence of the service experience. Examples include left-over food at restaurants, worn floor tiles in a shopping center, or piles of trash after a parade. In addition, since most service exchanges result in a receipt, receipt analysis can quantify the various services performed by the organization for the consumer (Lovelock 1991). Further outcome data are available from consumer hotlines and comment cards. Organizations such as Burger King, American Express, and Delta Airlines use such sources to track their service excellence and to identify problem areas. Similar devices can provide feedback from service employees (Berry and Parasuraman 1991).

SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS OF OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH TO SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality has become a major research theme in the services marketing literature (Grönroos 1984; Swartz and Brown 1989; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1990). Perhaps the best known research stream concerning services quality is that by the team of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1986; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1990). Their multi-phased study has generated a model of service delivery in which five potential gaps affect the quality of service. The gaps reflect circumstances that impact both the process and the outcome of service delivery. The degree to which the gaps are present in a service organization increases the likelihood of inferior service quality. While Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1986) discuss various survey-based methods for researching the gaps (e.g., their SERVQUAL scale), observational methods also may be used to investigate service quality. Observational research might be conducted as a qualitative supplement to surveys or as a preliminary means of gleaning insights to be used in developing later survey efforts.

According to Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1988), the first gap represents the difference between consumer expectations about service and management's perceptions of those expectations. Gap 1 is primarily a cognitive gap and its dimensions might be uncovered through the Critical Incident Technique discussed earlier. By using this method one could identify and analyze the "moments of truth" that shape customers' perceptions of the service organization, as well as service managements' perceptions of what consumers want in service delivery. Discrepancies between the two would reflect a service quality problem.

Gap 2 is the "difference between management perceptions of consumer expectations and service quality specifications" (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988, pp. 35–36). Due to limited resources or management indifference, an organization may not set service specifications that satisfy their customers. Several observational techniques can be used to explore the dimensions of this gap. For instance, content analysis of documents that codify the process of service assembly for an organization's employees could be conducted to determine the organization's service specifications. In addition, observations from the point of view of a service participant might uncover discrepancies arising from management's perceptions of what is needed to ensure quality and the conversion of those perceptions into service specifications.

The difference between what is specified as service quality by an organization and the service actually delivered is Gap 3 (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). While management may prescribe service specifications that will meet or surpass consumer expectations (e.g., greeting a customer within fifteen seconds of entering the store), organizations and their workers may fail to realize these objectives. Again, a wide range of observational techniques might be employed to explore that circumstance. For example, mystery shoppers could document various particulars of service delivery that may be of interest to management (e.g., the quickness of customer approach) or a systematic examination of customer response/comment cards (a type of indirect observation) could be conducted to identify service delivery breakdowns at key points.

According to Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1988), Gap 4 represents the difference between service that is delivered and the service expectation that an organization establishes through marketing communication. If an organization's promotional efforts create unrealistic expectations, they are likely to damage consumers' perceptions of quality. Content analysis (Marshall and Rossman 1989; Weber 1985) of both print and broadcast advertisements could examine the basis of consumers' expectations, while participant or non-participant observation may discern the nature of the service produced (i.e., whether it lived up to its "billing" with regard to speed, courtesy, etc.).

The fifth service quality gap occurs when a discrepancy exists between consumers' expectations of service and their perceptions of the service delivered (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). Consumers evaluate service performances against a set of expectations that they bring with them to a service encounter. Observational methods such as the CIT can uncover the nature of those expectations as well as perceptions of service performance. In addition, participant observation, particularly of a type that intimately involves the observer as a customer, could ascertain the service's ability to meet expectations.

Observational techniques and applications beyond those cited here are certainly possible. Further, whichever observational methods are determined useful, their value is greatly enhanced if employed in conjunction with survey research. Nevertheless, observational techniques offer the services researcher an attractive alternative and/or supplementary method to examine service quality dimensions upclose.

ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTING DIRECT HUMAN OBSERVATION IN SERVICES

Much of the focus of this article has been on direct human observation of services phenomena. Several issues emerge when implementing a research plan using it. Many of these

were addressed earlier (e.g., ethicality concerns and decisions regarding concealment). Even so, additional issues warrant discussion here.

Stages and Issues in the Service Research Process

Similar to other modes of information gathering, direct human observational research follows a certain sequence (i.e., determination of research objectives, choice of observational method, instrument construction and research design, selection and training of observers, placement of the observers in the field, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation). Each stage in the process carries specific concerns, yet all are intimately interrelated. The decisions/activities occurring at one stage are likely to have an impact on any or all others. For instance, the first step, determination of research objectives, will likely affect other research decisions, such as the choice of the observational method to be used. If one's objective is to explore a service phenomenon (e.g., courtesy level of a service's contact personnel), then an unstructured and/or concealed technique would be appropriate. In turn, the mode of observation chosen influences other phases of the research process, such as construction of the research instrument (e.g., its length and detail), selection and training of observers (e.g., criteria for choosing them and the duration/scope of their indoctrination), and the data collection effort itself (e.g., where and when the data are recorded). In sum, it is difficult to speak of any particular stage of observational service research without recognizing that it is affected by and similarly affects decisions at other stages. With that in mind, several issues concerning various observational research stages need attention.

Data Recording

Those responsible for collecting services data face different types of constraints depending on the nature of the research plan. For instance, concealment of one's identity from research subjects requires recording data away from public inspection. Relatedly, since humans are limited in the number of details to which they can attend, instruments to aid observation of service phenomena are desirable. When direct human observation is used, researchers may simply record notes during their occurrence or rely on recall to record data after observation takes place. Depending on the research focus, observers may use a structured, well-devised instrument (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975) such as those used in secret shopper investigations or record in potentially great detail a wide array of insights and reflections for later analysis.

Selection and Training

While careful selection and training of the observers is always important for services researchers, it takes on different urgency under conditions of participation, unstructured observation, and/or concealment. The reliability of data depends on locating and adequately training observers (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975). An observer must demographically and behaviorally fit the service environment he/she is investigating, register information objectively without exerting influence, be well-versed in the problems/issues likely to be encountered, and be adept at focusing on key research issues. Training techniques such as role-playing, video presentations of appropriate behaviors, case studies, lectures, and pretesting address these issues.

Gaining Entry

Placing observers in the field is a cogent issue for those independently investigating services phenomena. The setting where the service is to be studied may be visible or invisible to the public and open or closed to non-participants (Eiglier and Langeard 1977; Jorgensen 1989). To gain access through approved means to the invisible and/or closed setting requires substantial negotiation on the part of the researcher or necessitates concealing one's purpose and raising issues of ethicality if entry is gained without approval. The decision to be overt or covert about one's role in the service environment is fragile. An overt approach may be rejected and presumably negates the chance of gaining access covertly. Those who rely on direct human observation must weigh the pros and cons of both the overt and covert approaches to gaining entry to the field, recognize that either approach can be accomplished through a variety of means (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Jorgensen 1989), and be cognizant of the time and effort needed to accomplish this task.

Evaluation Criteria

The criteria for evaluating observational services research can be examined from both positivist and post-positivist perspectives. Reliability and validity are the essence of any traditional discussion of evaluation criteria for research and require meticulous procedures. Establishing the degree to which a finding is reliable (free from accidental circumstances) and valid (interpreted in an accurate manner) confronts services researchers, regardless of the observational method they may employ. Testing service-related hypotheses requires a grasp of such concepts as content validity (are the results supported by the knowledgeable service community as truthful?), criterion validity (are the results similar to those generated by another valid method of service study?), construct validity (do the results correspond with the theoretical logic about the service phenomenon?), and reliability (are the results likely to be the same over repeated observations and/or across different data gatherers?). Rigorous planning, standardized procedures, and careful specification of research variables can increase the accuracy and reliability of service observations. So devised, investigation of a service phenomenon results in greater likelihood of correspondence among the reiterated observations of one observer, as well as congruency among different observers of the phenomenon (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Kirk and Miller 1986).

A premise of post-positivist inquiry is that different criteria are needed to evaluate research results (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Wallendorf and Belk (1989) posit five alternative criteria to ascertain the trustworthiness of naturalistic research results: credibility (are the representations of the service-related constructs believable?); transferability (can the observations be applied to other similar service con-

texts?); dependability (are the research findings reasonably stable?); confirmability (are the researchers' conclusions reasonable given the data collected?); and integrity (are the data devoid of lies, misinformation or misrepresentation by the service participants?). The first four of these criteria are analogous to criteria used with positivistic research (internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, respectively). They have been adapted to capture research aspects more in line with interpretive or post-positivistic inquiry, which includes a significant portion of observational methods applied to services.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the gathering of additional information to cross-check the validity and improve the overall quality of one's data (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest three methods of triangulation involving multiple sources, methods, and investigators. Multiple sources triangulation includes "multiple copies of one type of source (such as interview respondents) or different sources of the same information" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 305). In a services context, multiple sources might involve interviewing both customers and managers concerning service quality. Findings that differed would be supportive evidence of the service quality gaps. Consistent findings across both sources would have greater credibility.

The multiple methods approach to triangulation requires that more than one method be used to research a phenomenon (e.g., interview, survey, participant observation, or experiment). The use of multiple methods can corroborate, illuminate or elaborate the research question (Rossman and Wilson 1985). A services researcher wishing to pursue this approach in a study of service quality might compare the results of using the SERVQUAL survey with customer interviews and participant observation. Findings that appeared in all three methods would be more believable than those found in only one or two methods.

Multiple investigator triangulation involves comparisons of observations made by different data gatherers (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Kirk and Miller 1986). Triangulation across a team of researchers minimizes discrepancies in the recording of data (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) and converges toward a single reality (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). The lesson for services researchers is to corroborate research findings by comparing observations from several data gatherers. Further verification might rely on a panel of experts, knowledgeable others or members of the service environment under scrutiny (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

This discussion of the implementation of direct human observation does not address all considerations that will be encountered. Additional concerns such as human and financial resources, time constraints, and organizational philosophy should be recognized since they influence the nature and excellence of the observational effort (Frederichs and Ludtke 1975; Marshall and Rossman 1989).

CONCLUSION

Observational methods are quite appropriate and applicable to the investigation of services marketing phenomena. A general overview of many considerations associated with their implementation was provided. Observational data collection methods include several dimensions, each of which was examined for its potential impact on services research. When combined, the dimensions generate various alternatives for services researchers. Direct human observation was submitted as the observational form with the broadest services application. It is the one alternative in which the researcher is requisitely involved in the lives of the subjects and/or allows the researcher to observe service participants in their own territory and interact in their own language (Kirk and Miller 1986). Direct human observation and other observational forms were examined as means to study the different stages in the service process and the service quality gaps that may exist in service systems. Several issues relevant to implementing observational methods were explored.

Our contention is that service organizations, large and small, can benefit from the use of observational methods in general and direct human observation in particular. These methods have the potential to uncover critical factors contributing to service quality, identify changes among a service organization's market, and promote serendipitous discovery of service delivery elements. As a supplement to survey techniques, observational methods can generate hypotheses and/or provide a means to confirm/disconfirm evidence so gathered. As with any form of research, observational methods exhibit various strengths and weaknesses. Failure to recognize the limitations associated with the different observational types can lead to foolish research decisions. However, if one is careful in selecting the appropriate method to explore a specific services marketing problem, valuable insights are likely. Services researchers should weigh the potential benefits offered by observational methods and include them among their data collection repertoire.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephen J. Grove is Associate Professor of Marketing at Clemson University. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Texas Christian University and his Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University. Among his publications include articles in the *Journal of Health Care Marketing*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Psychological Reports*, *Simulation and Games*, *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, and others. His research has appeared in the proceedings of numerous national and regional marketing conferences.

Raymond P. Fisk is Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Central Florida. He received his B.S., M.B.A., and Ph.D. from Arizona State University. He has published in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Health Care Marketing*, *Journal of Professional Services Marketing*, and has presented numerous papers at national and regional marketing conferences. Dr. Fisk has published three books: *Airways: A Marketing Simulation*, *Marketing Theory: Distinguished Contributions*, and *Services Marketing: An Annotated Bibliography*.