

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Naturalistic Observation

Contributors: Lynne E. F. McKechnie

Editors: Lisa M. Given

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Naturalistic Observation"

Pub. Date: 2008

Access Date: October 16, 2013

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412941631

Online ISBN: 9781412963909

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n281>

Print pages: 551-552

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n281>

The central defining features of naturalistic observation are that it takes place in the natural setting for the phenomenon of interest, the researcher does not attempt to manipulate that setting in any way, and no constraints (e.g., predetermined categories) are placed on the outcome of the investigation. Naturalistic observation seeks to provide authentic, rich descriptions of the behavior of interest as it naturally exists and unfolds in its real context. It emphasizes understanding and describing social activities from the point of view of the participants themselves. Naturalistic observation asserts that such understanding is possible only through firsthand accounts.

Data collection typically involves unstructured observation and informal interviewing, with note taking, audiorecording, and occasionally videorecording used to record data. Particular attention is paid to what participants say as a way to understand the meanings they attach to events and activities. Naturalistic observation is also characterized by emergent research design, purposeful sampling, and inductive data analysis. Believing that data must come from real life, researchers work to get as close to their data as possible. At the same time, investigators strive to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to disrupt the natural setting being studied.

A major strength of naturalistic observation is that the data collected closely reflect the real, naturally occurring context and the actual actions of the participants in that context. The trustworthiness of the data arises from this emphasis on the natural setting. With its flexible, unstructured approach, naturalistic observation often captures behavior that may not have been anticipated while also allowing for focusing on specific areas of interest. Naturalistic observation affords opportunities to explore complex phenomena (e.g., interactions between individuals in everyday life settings such as work places) not easily investigated by other more structured methods such as surveys or field experiments.

The major weakness of naturalistic observation is its potential for generating reactivity or observer effect. This weakness may be addressed through the use of **[p. 551 ↓]** multiple observers and tests of intercoder reliability, although this strategy could result in even more reactivity in some settings, such as those involving only a few participants in a relatively small space. Member checking, while intrusive, is also helpful. Some researchers employ covert observation to reduce reactivity, although this approach

is not always seen as acceptable in that it violates the principle of informed consent. Closely related to the problem of observer effect is the problem of observer bias, the idea that data will be limited by the characteristics of the individual collecting those data. Naturalistic observation typically yields large amounts of textual data that require a lot of time to manage and analyze. Finally, naturalistic observation is not effective for studying infrequently occurring or unpredictable behaviors, as this would require inordinate amounts of time in the field.

Lynne E. F. McKechnie

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n281>

See also

Further Readings

Gubrium, J. F. (1997). *The new language of qualitative method*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.