

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Unobtrusive Research

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In their book *Unobtrusive Measures*, Eugene Webb, Donald Campbell, Richard Schwartz, and Lee Sechrest noted that each research method has its own weakness or bias. To counterbalance the weakness of one method, they suggested that researchers use multiple methods (referred to in the literature as methods triangulation) to obtain a more accurate or complete picture of the entity under investigation. One of these methods is unobtrusive research, which can be defined as methods that involve no direct or overt contact with the study participants. Although unobtrusive measures also have their own unique weaknesses, Webb et al. suggested their use to complement data collected through other methods.

Types of Unobtrusive Research

Unobtrusive research methods evoke thoughts of historical research or of observations in which the researcher can play the role of a complete observer. However, there is much more to this type of research than the obvious. In the literature, attempts have been made to categorize unobtrusive research methods. Webb et al. discussed erosion and accretion measures. In the former category are things that demonstrate wear (e.g., worn pages in a book), while the latter category focuses on the build up of things (e.g., the build up of garbage or accumulation of books in a personal library). Another way is to look at these methods through print and nonprint categories. This entry provides a brief description of some of the methods subsumed under this broad categorization of unobtrusive research and the resources used. The method and the resources used by the researcher depend on the purpose of the research project, the availability of the items, and on her or his training, imagination, and creative spirit. Data analysis for unobtrusive research includes content, thematic, or semiotic analysis. For a discussion of these analytic methods, readers are advised to consult other entries in this text, as well as other authoritative sources.

Print Materials

The examination of print material falls under the rubric of unobtrusive research because there is usually no direct contact with the original writer. Researchers, such as historians, use current as well as archival documents, such as diaries, letters, newspapers, historical pamphlets, broadsheets, government documents, and census data, to name a few. Tombstones provide a wealth of information on family histories, wars, immigration, health, and the justice system. Graffiti can be studied from a social or linguistic perspective. Textbooks can be perused to determine how information on a topic has changed over the years. For example, a researcher may examine all the editions of a medical textbook to follow the social, cultural, and medical evolution of a disease. Pharmaceutical advertisements in magazines can shed light on gender issues. In case studies where the emphasis is on gaining a good understanding of phenomena within a particular setting, there is a good marriage between obtrusive (e.g., interviews or overt observation) and unobtrusive methods. Researchers often comb through the emails, memos, minutes of meetings, annual reports, and so on of the case under investigation. Maps or floor plans can also provide unexpected information about activities within and the social milieu of an institution. Other print sources available to researchers are photographs, paintings, and sheet music. Art historians study paintings to understand the different periods of an artist's career. Photographs can be used to study architecture, automobiles, genealogy, or fashion trends. Dictionaries and thesauri, such as the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* or the American Psychological Association's *Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms*, can be consulted to trace gender and social changes. There are so many print resources that can be used in unobtrusive research that it is not possible to list them all. Interested researchers can read more about these topics in the list of further readings below.

Nonprint Resources

Included in this category are people, computers, and recordings. Each one will be discussed briefly.

People

In observational studies of people, a researcher can play a number of roles throughout the study. The first role may be as a complete observer, which allows the researcher to become familiar with the people, place, and activities of the community being studied. The researcher's role is restricted to observing, and no attempt is made to engage the participants in conversation. This role can be quite useful in studies of how people use space, such as in airports, subway stations, libraries, or places of worship. For many social science researchers, however, complete observation seems to have lost its appeal because the validity of the data collected may be called into question. Without being able to ask questions, the researcher may misinterpret, misunderstand, or not grasp the full meaning of what she or he sees.

The use of proxies is another unobtrusive research method. People (often students) are recruited and trained to engage in a certain activity, such as asking particular questions of a librarian, teacher, or police officer, to name a few examples. The proxies record their activities, observations, and results and give the report to the researcher for analysis. Although this method has definite advantages (one of which is the detachment of the researcher from the actual interaction), there are some major disadvantages, such as how the proxies play their role, whether they complete the agreed upon assignment, and whether they accurately remember the transactions or write a complete and accurate report.

Computers

The advent of the internet allows researchers to collect data and yet remain completely absent from the scene. Two unobtrusive, nonparticipation methods discussed in the literature are transactional log analysis (TLA) and netnography. TLA allows researchers to observe how people maneuver their way through databases or other online products. TLA is a good way to assess the accessibility and user friendliness of a website or to learn about people's strategies for finding information. Netnography is the ethnographic study of people through their communications in chat rooms, listservs, blogs, and other

online forums. Through lurking, researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of people's thoughts, opinions, and beliefs relating to a myriad of issues, such as health, travel, politics, wars, and so on. Two articles, covering many issues in the use of netnography as a research method, have been included in Further Readings.

Recordings

The final category includes musical recordings, audiotapes, films, and videos. The latter two are particularly good resources for researchers interested in understanding the behavior of people within the context of a situation. One example is the use of video cameras to capture both voice and actions of study participants who are testing a new database or website. Audiotapes and musical recordings can be studied for pattern recognition, linguistic trends, social or cultural issues, or other phenomena of interest.

Advantages and Disadvantages

With interviews, questionnaires, and observations, there is the potential for participants to alter their behavior in reaction to the researcher's presence or to the realization that they are being studied. The major advantage of unobtrusive research is that this reactive effect is eliminated. Other advantages are based on the method and resources used. For example, access to print and nonprint resources might be easier. Using netnography, data can be collected in a safe environment, such as in a home, office, or library. Furthermore, because there is no face-to-face contact with participants, researchers may be able to collect more reliable information on sensitive topics. The researcher can work at her or his own convenience because there are no appointments to [p. 906 ↓] schedule with study participants. Finally, some authors suggest that this type of research is less expensive to do; however, they may not be taking into account the cost of traveling to archives or observation sites, obtaining interlibrary loans, or purchasing documents.

However, there are also disadvantages with unobtrusive research. Gaining approval to use nonparticipant or complete observation data collection techniques from an ethics review board (IRB) of a university may be problematic. Some members of the

IRB may not see such methods as viable ways to collect data, while others may veto these techniques on ethical grounds. Selectivity is another major problem. People who wrote the original documents may have selectively recorded events, thus incorporating their biases. Their handwriting may be faded or difficult, if not impossible, to read. Furthermore, written material reflects only the stories of literate people. Print and nonprint documents may be missing from collections or, due to budget restraints, curators may have been selective in what they purchased. In the nonparticipant or complete observer role, researchers may not record important events because of lack of knowledge, inattention, bias, boredom, or fatigue. Researchers who decide to use an on-off schedule of observation may miss crucial events during the off period. In addition, the researchers' distance from the people involved in the event may hinder their ability to explain what is really transpiring. Therefore, the representativeness of their observations can be questioned. Thus, although there are some definite advantages, the disadvantages of unobtrusive research methods speak to the need to use them in conjunction with other methods that can offset these inherent weaknesses.

Ethical Considerations

There are ethical issues in both categories of unobtrusive research. In the print category, misrepresentation of information, plagiarism, and violations of copyright are all possibilities. Researchers may also select data that coincide with their opinions or intents and ignore what does not conform. Allan Kellehear mentions that researchers need to be honest with library or archival staff about their intended role. He also addresses the issue of confidentiality (or anonymity) for the people or institutions named in any current documents. They may not want their identities revealed in any published research.

In the nonprint category, ethical issues abound. Studying people without their informed consent is of paramount importance, especially if the researcher intends to publish the results of the study and does not use other methods to corroborate her or his findings. In the literature about the studying of online communities (e.g., netnography), the overarching question seems to concern the ethics of lurking. Discussions center on public versus private domain and the potential invasion of privacy of the people who are posting messages. Are they aware that what they post can be published as part

of a research study? Have people had the opportunity to consent or request that their postings not be made public? Do they know that a researcher is lurking on a site where, heretofore, they have felt comfortable discussing issues of interest with other people in the particular community? Some of these questions have been addressed by the IRBs of many universities who have designed specific forms for the use of the internet in research. Items covered may include the typical ones on how the data will be collected and recruitment methods, but may also require a letter of support from the owner of the site. As the use of unobtrusive research methods involving the internet becomes more commonplace, some of these issues may be resolved. Overall, unobtrusive research methods have their place in qualitative research, but researchers have to be aware of the challenges involved so that no harm is done to any individual.

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See also

Further Readings

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