

The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods

UNOBTRUSIVE MEASURES

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Definition

Measures that concentrate on the traces of human action, on the evidence of human activity left in the environment. Traces need not be incidental, they can be intentionally created, such as graffiti.

Distinctive Features

Although some disciplines are reliant on these methods, such as archaeology, in the social sciences the methods were not given a framework until 1966 when Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest (1966) published *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences* (updated in 1981 as *Nonreactive Measures in the Social Sciences*).

Unobtrusive measures can be used within an experimental framework, for example, within the 'lost letters' paradigm. Merritt and Fowler (1948) wanted to know about public honesty, and to test this they put letters in envelopes with addresses, and in some they placed lead weights the size of 50 cents pieces. The independent measures were the numbers of letters of each kind mailed back.

Unobtrusive measures can also be used to investigate much more sensitive matters, such as drug use of certain kinds. The goal in all of these cases has been to study behaviours that are very likely to be subject to response bias under more direct forms of measurement, for example direct questioning, or where researchers might be put at risk. An example is that of an investigation of the levels and patterns of drug use in the community. Police data are severely limited as this constitutes arrest data, and arrests are subject to police activity and 'special' operations. Therefore the data will misrepresent certain types of people or drug types that are less likely to come to police attention. Data from drug treatment agencies represent only those whose use has become problematic and have accessed services. Further, it is widely documented now that few drug users can obtain services, or even try to obtain them, even when needed. A survey of drug users would be subject to response bias with respondents either playing down or exaggerating their substance use, according to their own motives.

Unobtrusive measures of drug use, including disposed or discarded drug paraphernalia and hepatitis 'C' rates, can identify patterns, which may confirm or complement trends in administrative statistics, while at the same time avoiding the problems associated with reactivity, invasion of privacy and ethical principles.

It is possible to use other kinds of unobtrusive measures, such as minutes of public meetings, or management committee meetings in schools or other public organizations. Although this is commonly called archival or document-based research, it is also a type of unobtrusive measure. The main principle behind the method is that the data should already be in existence, or very easy to obtain. Our personal experience is that asking public authorities for copies of information they already hold can make information suddenly [p. 310 ↓] very sensitive. Therefore it is wise to find unobtrusive measures that researchers can observe or collect for themselves.

The kinds of unobtrusive data suggested here are all amenable to quantitative analysis, and with care, inferential statistics.

Evaluation

Unobtrusive measurement has several crucial advantages over the alternatives. It is normally cheap, it is not liable to response bias and is seldom attached to any single individual, reducing ethical problems associated with invasion of privacy. Such data cannot always be conclusive when taken alone, but will be suggestive and are best gathered using the principle of triangulation, where several kinds of data are collected in order to address the same question.

The advantages include the non-reactivity of the methods: since the performers are not aware of being part of an investigation, they do not behave as if they are being observed. They provide cross-validation of mainstream methods. They encourage researchers to look at their research questions afresh, and consider new ways of investigation. Therefore they provide a spur to ingenuity and creativity in research.

The disadvantages of the methods, some suggest, include the lack of identity of the person providing the data. Also, there are problems of making inferences about the

level of incidence. For example, one person may be responsible for most of the graffiti in an area. Also, the apparent level of cause and effect may be mediated by other influences. For example, consumption of diet foods in a girls' dormitory may have less to do with eating problems or worries about weight control, and more to do with sales promotions and free gifts. It is important to eliminate the unlikely explanation, before assuming that unobtrusive measures are signs of particular kinds of behaviour. Finally, although unobtrusive measures research may avoid certain ethical problems it can also raise others. For example, analysing the contents of residents, garbage cans may indicate forms of lifestyle but can also contravene the principle of informed consent.

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Associated Concepts:

Key Readings

Lee, R. M. (2000) *Unobtrusive Measures in Social Research*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

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