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Unobtrusive methods

Unobtrusive measures, a data collection method primarily used in social sciences, were first proposed by Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest (1966). Data is collected without the researchers interfering in participants' lives. It differentiates itself from obtrusive measures such as interviews, surveys, and experiments based on indirect and undisclosed data collection approaches. Kazdin (1979) identified three types of unobtrusive methods.

- 1 *Physical traces*: These are physical evidence of erosion measures (wear patterns) and accretion measures (deposits). For example, the erosion of floors is indicative of how widely the pathway has been used. Accretion measures include graffiti, litter, and fingerprints.
- 2 *Archives/documentary sources*: They are preexisting documents or records such as court documents (certificates of birth, marriage, divorce, and death), mass media (newspapers, magazines, websites, films, videos), and sales, industrial, institutional, and digital records (receipts, library borrowing records, shipping records).
- 3 *Nonparticipant observations*: These occur when participants being observed are unaware that they are being watched and the researcher does not influence the structure of the situation.

Unobtrusive measures in social media

Digital media have greatly expanded the horizon for the use of unobtrusive measures. Digital footprints provide trace indicators of use of technology and qualities of social interaction and communication. Examples include social network analysis, analysis of log files and hyperlinks, content analysis or thematic analysis of Twitter or Facebook posts, and visualization of geolocation data collected by GPS.

Advantages

Unobtrusive measures reduce the inherent bias in self-report data. They examine and assess “ephemeral traces” (Dabbs, 1982), which people purposefully or inadvertently leave behind to understand how they behave and structure their lives without the knowledge of the participants (Lee, 2000). Participants are unaware of their role as research subjects and hence unaffected by the desire to perform well or please the researcher. Unobtrusive measures are particularly useful in historical research and in populations where it is difficult to use direct methods to collect data.

Disadvantages

Limited information can be collected by unobtrusive measures. Using unobtrusive measures does not provide simple solutions to problems with using reactive assessment such as questionnaires or interviews. The quality of data may be called into question if they are not collected specifically for the purpose embodied in the project. In recent times, a decrease in unobtrusive measures has been linked to increased popularity and adherence to the doctrine of informed consent, a fall in the use of deception, and the effort to conceptualize research participants as cooperative participants (Page, 2000).

SEE ALSO: Ethics of Empirical Research; Fieldwork; Observational Methods; Online Ethnography; Qualitative Methodology

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Further reading

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