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Unobtrusive Measures

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Introduction

It has long been understood that the act of eliciting data from research participants is capable of affecting the character of the responses obtained, and that the presence of the researcher within the research situation can introduce potentially distorting factors that need to be taken into consideration. Worries about the extent to which the social sciences rely on methods that are “reactive” have encouraged interest in what came to be dubbed “unobtrusive measures” (known also as “nonreactive measures”), sources of data that avoid problems caused by the researcher’s presence or involvement in the data-gathering process. Such sources include the physical traces produced by people as they traverse their environment, data derived from nonparticipant observation, and the use of documents of various kinds. The data produced by unobtrusive methods can be used alone, but an important strength of such methods is their use in combination with other methods so that the weaknesses inherent in data produced by one set of means can be offset by using data produced in a different way with different strengths and different weaknesses. A further important feature of the literature on unobtrusive measures is its stress on unusual, imaginative, or innovative sources of data rather than relying on the standard repertoire of approaches to be found in research methods textbooks.

General Overviews

Eugene Webb, Donald Campbell, Richard Schwartz, and Lee Sechrest introduced the concept of unobtrusive measures, and provided a host of examples of their use, in a book published in 1966 that has since become a classic (Webb, et al. 1966). Sechrest 1979 is a later edited collection that seeks to extend and elaborate on the original conception of unobtrusive measures from a variety of perspectives. In 1981 a revised and expanded edition of Webb, et al. 1966 appeared with a new title, *Nonreactive Measures in the Social Sciences* (Webb, et al. 1981). Since then a number of texts, such as Kellehear 1993 and Lee 2000, have appeared, seeking to reignite interest in the work of Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest, and to bring the uses of unobtrusive methods to new generations of students and researchers (see Webb, et al. 2000).

Kellehear, Allan. *The Unobtrusive Researcher: A Guide to Methods*. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993.

A short, well-written Australian text that makes a particularly useful introduction to the topic for students.

Lee, Raymond M. *Unobtrusive Methods in Social Research*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000.

A detailed overview of the literature on unobtrusive methods intended to bring up to date various aspects of the method.

Sechrest, Lee. *Unobtrusive Measurement Today. New Directions for Methodology of Behavioral Science 1*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

An edited collection intended to expand on the original formulation of the method and that contains detailed discussions of particular aspects of unobtrusive measures.

Webb, Eugene J., Donald T. Campbell, Richard D. Schwartz, and Lee Sechrest. *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*. Rand McNally Sociology Series. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966.

This is the original classic statement with many detailed examples of what unobtrusive measures are and why they are useful.

Webb, Eugene J., Donald T. Campbell, Richard D. Schwartz, and Lee Sechrest. *Unobtrusive Measures*. Rev. ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2000.

This book is a reprinted edition of the original 1966 text with a new and informative introduction by Schwartz and Sechrest.

Webb, Eugene J., Donald T. Campbell, Richard D. Schwartz, Lee Sechrest, and Janet Belew Grove. *Nonreactive Measures in the Social Sciences*. 2d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

With a new title, an updated and expanded version of Webb, et al. 1966.

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