

Unobtrusive Methods in Social Research

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Introduction

Unobtrusive methods in social research are an interesting aspect of the broader qualitative procedures in social science research which seek answers to questions by examining in non – intrusive manner various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers are most interested in the day to day activities of a people, how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of or in a particular location make sense of their surroundings through various aspects of traditions and culture, such as symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, among others. In order not to interfere with the nature, cultural and traditional fabric of a people, research procedures that require a non-intrusion into the lives of a subject are often encouraged in social research. Researcher reactivity-(the response of subjects to the presence of an intruding investigator) has been observed to create a gap as well as losses of vital information with the conditioning of subjects' behaviour, often without the researcher's knowledge.

Unobtrusive method in social research becomes necessary in making positive use of the 'reactivity' or better still in 'neutralizing' it. Though in many research and texts, unobtrusive methods compared to intrusive methods are often not well discussed and used regularly, when research methods books do mention unobtrusive procedures, they typically define terms. Recommended classical research texts such as Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996), give only a very brief explanation on the work of Webb et al.(1981), or obscure unobtrusive measures with general content analysis strategies of analysis (Babbie, 1998). Extracts from Berg (2001:189) revealed the extent to which unobtrusive method in social science research has been neglected in classical texts:

Unobtrusive studies are sometimes briefly-highlighted in textbook descriptions of unobtrusive measures-just before dismissing these techniques in favour of measures regarded as more legitimate. Even comprehensive compendiums of qualitative strategies and techniques omit the topic of unobtrusive measures and nonreactive research techniques (see, for example, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994;

1998).

Unobtrusive measures actually make up a particularly interesting-and innovative strategy for collecting and assessing data. In some instances,-unobtrusive indicators provide access to aspects of social settings and their inhabitants that are simply unreachable through any other means. To some extent, all the unobtrusive strategies amount to examining and-assessing human traces. Literally, human traces are physical items left behind by humans often as the result of some unconscious or unintentional activity that tell us something about these individuals. What they do, how they behave and structure their daily lives, and even how humans are affected by certain ideological stances can all be observed in traces people either intentionally or inadvertently leave behind. Because these traces have been left behind without the producers' knowledge of their potential usefulness to social scientists, these pieces of research information are *non-reactively produced*.

Knowing fully well that research methods on human beings affect how a people will be-viewed, there is the need therefore to study human beings in their natural environment without interfering or conditioning their behaviour either as a result of the research or by the researcher as the case may be (Berg, 2001; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Similarly, the argument against the study of human beings as a statistical aggregate comes from the fact that human beings are cultural and traditionally enrobed and if studied in a symbolically reduced fashion, there is a danger that conclusions although arithmetically precise-may fail to explain the complex human social reality. According to Berg 2001, qualitative techniques allow researchers to-share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how-people structure and give meaning to their daily lives. Thus, researchers using-qualitative techniques often examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others. As Douglas (1976, p. 12) suggests, the methods used by social scientists fall along a continuum from totally uncontrolled (and perhaps uncontrollable) techniques arising in natural settings to totally controlled techniques of observation. It remains, then, for researchers to choose their procedures keeping in mind the problems that may arise in specific research settings among certain-research groups and in unique research circumstances.

Some authors associate qualitative research with the single technique of participant observation. Other writers extend their understanding of qualitative research to include interviewing as well.

However, popular qualitative research additionally includes such methods as observation of experimental natural settings, photographic techniques (including videotaping), historical analysis (historiography), document and textual analysis, sociometry, sociodrama and similar ethno-methodological experimentation, ethnographic research, and a number of unobtrusive techniques.

Advocates of particular methodological styles of research are frequently more concerned with asserting or defending their techniques than with indicating alternative ways of approaching the subject of research. Similarly most researchers have come to realise the need to combine methods, at least one methodological technique they feel most comfortable using, which often becomes their favourite or only approach to research. This might be why many previous qualitative research texts presented only a single research methodology (participant observation, interviewing, or unobtrusive measures). Further, many researchers perceive their research method as an *atheoretical* tool (Denzin, 1978). Because of this, they fail to recognize that methods impose certain perspectives on reality. For example, when researchers go to the field and organise interviews with their subjects to discuss their opinions or assessments of some social issues, often than not a theoretical assumption has already been made--specifically, that reality is fairly constant and stable. Similarly, when they make direct observations of events, researchers assume reality is deeply affected by the actions of all participants, including themselves. Each method thus reveals slightly different facets of the same symbolic reality. Every method is a different line of sight directed toward the same point, observing social and symbolic reality. By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements. The use of several lines of sight is frequently called triangulation. Though this is not the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning for emphasis sake that an early reference to triangulation was first made in relation to the idea of unobtrusive method proposed by Webb et al. (1966:3), who suggested,

“Once a proposition has been confirmed by two or more independent measurement processes, the uncertainty of its interpretation is greatly reduced. The most persuasive evidence comes through a triangulation of measurement processes” (p. 3)

Thus, it is important to state that like triangulation the best way to gather information on human subjects is to combine one or more unobtrusive methods. The paragraph below comprehensively examines the four broad categories of unobtrusive strategies. These are: Observation, Archival Strategies, Physical Erosion and Accretion.

Categories of Unobtrusive Methods in Social Science Research

1. Observation

As an ethnographic research method, observation seems to have no specific beginning. While some researchers found indications of its use in ancient times, others have pointed to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when anthropologists starting “collecting data firsthand” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). Describing it as the “bedrock source of human knowledge” about the “social and natural world,” Adler and Adler (1994) stated that Aristotle used observational techniques in his botanical studies on the island of Lesbos and that Auguste Comte, the father of sociology, listed observation as a core research method” (p. 377). Observations have led to some of the most important scientific discoveries in human history. Charles Darwin used observations of the animal and marine life at the Galapagos Islands to help him formulate his theory of evolution that he describes in *On the Origin of Species*. Observations can be conducted on nearly any subject matter, thus social scientists, natural scientists, engineers, computer scientists, educational researchers, and many others use observations as a primary research method.

Generally there are two broad approaches to using observational techniques in researching behaviours: (a) participant observation and (b) nonparticipant observation. Participant observers conduct their observations “from the inside”; that is, the researcher is an integral part of the environment being observed. Nonparticipant observers conduct their observations “from the outside”; the researcher does not interact with those being observed. (1967). The crux of the matter of observational studies is often related to sampling (precisely on how to get respondents): “who, what, where, and when” questions. Polit and Hungler (1987) divided the units of observation into two categories: molar and molecular. Molar involves observing large units of activity “as a whole,” whereas the molecular approach “uses small and highly specific behaviors as the unit of observation” (p. 268). These two categories are not mutually exclusive. For

example, the researcher may use the molar approach at the beginning of the study and change to the molecular one as her/his familiarity with, and understanding of, the insiders and their environment grows. Adler and Adler (1994) used the analogy of a funnel to describe this process wherein the stages of observation get progressively narrower and direct the researcher's "attention deeper into the elements of the setting that have emerged as theoretically and/or empirically essential" (p. 381).

In observation, the researcher uses all of her/his senses to gather information about the phenomena under study (Adler & Adler, 1994). A variety of material should also be used to enhance sensual observations. Audio-recorders can be used to tape interviews. Video-recorders or cameras can be used to record the activities of the insiders because, according to Collier and Collier (1986), cameras are an "instrumental extension of our senses" (p. 7) that may help researchers to "see more and with greater accuracy" (p. 5). In her multimethod study of hobby cooks that included "secondary research, interviews . . . and the unobtrusive analysis of sites," Hartel took 125 photographs to "capture the titles of books or file tabs with subject headings" (2003, p. 235). Other material such as minutes of meetings, memoranda, letters, magazines, or newspaper articles can also expand one's understanding of the study group. Spradley (1980) also mentioned making maps to record observations. Given and Leckie (2003) "mapped and photographed the visual space on all floors" of both libraries they studied "to document the location of furniture and equipment" in order to create the "seating sweeps checklist" (2003, p. 375). However there are ethics guiding the usage of observation as a research method. One of the major factors associated with observational studies is ethics. While observation is generally seen as the least intrusive data collection method, it can also be an abuse of an individual's privacy (Adler & Adler, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989; Chatman, 1992). Chatman (1992), in her book on retired women living in Garden Towers, discussed two different types of ethical dilemmas an observer can encounter. One is "*guilty knowledge*, in which the investigator is privy to confidential information, and [the other is] *dirty hands*; or a situation in which the researcher is able to correct or reveal some wrongdoing, but chooses not to do so" (p. 18). In observational research, the complexity of fieldwork in which the researcher is engaged "make[s] it difficult, if not impossible, to adopt single set of standards," (Spradley, 1980: 20). It is in this regard observational method be it participant or non-participant is often advised to be used alongside other obtrusive qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group discussions, among others.

2. Archival Strategies

Archival strategies deal with the proper scrutiny and intelligent examination of documented records, information, and history among others for academic cum research purposes. Documentations in various archives are typical examples. In Nigeria the national archives located in Ibadan houses a lot of information dated back to the pre-colonial, colonial, pre-independence and independence era. It is often updated from time to time. Similarly other institutional repositories such as libraries and other research institutions such as the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) and the various national museums are places where research can be conducted using the unobtrusive methods. According to Denzin (1978, p. 219), archival records can be divided into public archival records and private archival records. In the case of the former, *records* are viewed as prepared for the expressed purpose of examination by others.

Traditionally, the term *archive* brings to mind some form of library. No doubt libraries are indeed archives, so too are graveyard tombstones, hospital admittance records, church baptismal records, computer-accessed bulletin boards, motor vehicle registries, newspaper morgues, arrest records, and even credit companies' billing records. As Webb et al. (1981) suggest, virtually any *running record* provides a kind of archive.

Although access to public archives may be restricted to certain groups (forexample, certain law enforcement records, credit histories, school records, and so on) they are typically prepared for some audience. As a result, public archival records tend to be written in more or less standardized form and arranged in the archive systematically using alphabets (a-z), dates, (e.g chronologically, from 1900-2050) or numerically indexed (e.g 1-10). In contrast private archival records typically are intended for personal (private) audiences. Except for published versions of a diary or personal memoirs (which in effect become parts of the public archival system), private archival records reach extremely small-if any-audiences, but very useful in life histories research.

Private records are particularly useful for creating case studies or life histories. Typically, owing to the personal nature of private archives and documents, the subjects' own definitions life experiences are well captured. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Denzin (1978), Webb et al. (1981), and Taylor and Bogdan (1998), the autobiography is the most widely accepted form of

private and personal documents or archives. Autobiography could come in three types: comprehensive autobiographies, topical autobiographies, and edited autobiographies. The use of autobiography continues to meet resistance in some academic circles, and has even been called "self-indulgent" (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). In defence of the strategy of autobiography, Mykhalovskiy (1996, p.134) has written,

"The abstract, disembodied voice of traditional academic discourse [is] a fiction, accomplished through writing and other practices which remove evidence of a text's author, as part of concealing the condition of its production."

Nevertheless the usefulness and intimacy afforded by autobiographies, diaries, letters, and personal journals, remain and constitute an underutilized element in research especially in the social sciences unlike in the arts. Information via these methods offers more than simply a single individual's subjective view on matters. Berg (2001:218) noted that autobiographies offer a solid measure of data for the research process. There are instances where personal or private libraries have been taken over or willingly donated by family members of notables to the state, and in no time such archives become accessible to the public for research, thus the concept of public archival data in social science research. Public archival data are part and parcel of archival strategies. Webb et al. (1966, 1981), classified them into three broad groups of commercial media accounts, actuarial records, and official documentary records:

- a. Commercial media accounts may include the use of such items as newspapers, books, magazines, television program transcripts, videotapes, drawn comics, maps, and so forth.
- b. Actuarial records include items such as birth and death records; records of marriages and divorces; application information held by certain institutions. For example, churches, insurance and credit companies in custody of title, land, and deed information; and certain demographic or residential types of records. Such data tend to be produced for special or limited audiences but are typically available to the public under certain circumstances.
- c. Official documentary records may include but not limited to internally generated government agency reports, official court transcripts, police reports, census information, financial records, crime statistics, political speech transcripts, school records, bills of lading, sales records, and similar documents. Official documents may also include less obvious, and sometimes less openly available, forms of communications such as

interoffice memos, printed e-mail messages, minutes from meetings, organizational newsletters, and so forth. These materials often convey important and useful information that a researcher can effectively use as data. Similar to actuarial records, official documentary records limited to small audiences, but nevertheless they often find their way into the public domain.

3. Physical Erosion Measures

Physical evidence is frequently the key to resolving social scientific questions in research. Erosion measures include several types of evidence indicating that varying degrees of selective wear or usage have occurred on some object or material. According to Lee (2000), “everything in and of the world is irredeemably cultural, and therefore open to study, no matter how seemingly peripheral, insignificant or taken for granted” (p. 8). In most cases, erosion measures are used with other techniques in order to corroborate one another in studying human cultural remains. An example of an erosion measure is the examination of the frequency of usage of an item in a museum or library in order to examine the wear and tear that may have occurred over time. The most widely quoted illustration of how erosion measures operate involves a study at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry cited by Webb et al. (1981, p. 7):

A committee was formed to set up a psychological exhibit at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry. The committee learned that the vinyl tiles around the exhibit containing live, hatching chicks had to be replaced every six weeks or so; tiles in other areas of the museum went for years without replacement. A comparative study of the rate of tile replacement around the various museum exhibits could give a rough ordering of the popularity of the exhibits.

Webb et al. (1981) additionally note that beyond the erosion measure, unobtrusive observations (covert observers) indicated that people stood in front of the chick display longer than they stood near any other exhibit. Though there could have been other explanations, nonetheless, the illustration does indicate the particularly interesting kinds of information provided by augmenting data sources with erosion measures. This case further illustrates how multiple measures may be used to corroborate one another. Lee (2000) classifies these ‘physical traces’ as either running records or episodic records.

4. Accretion Measures

Accretion is one of the two identified physical trace measurement by Webb et al. (1966). Accretion is a measure, which involves the use of deposited materials as research evidence. Social scientists have recognized that materials deposited by individuals are useful for exploring a wide variety of behaviours. A clear example of the usefulness of accretion data is Blake's (1981) examination of the ethnic content of graffiti appearing in male lavatories at the University of Hawaii. This allowed Blake to identify, among other things, stereotypes of ethnic groups from other ethnic group messages that are typically taboo in Hawaii. Accretion measures available to the police may consist of DNA information, ballistic evidence, fingerprints and body recovery locations. And even students cheat sheets accumulated over a long time. The deposit of almost any object or material by humans can be an accretion (Berg, 2001). In fact, as illustrated by the work of Rathie (1979) even garbage may contain important clues to social culture using accretion measures. There are several advantages to erosion and accretion measures. Certainly, it should be clear that they are themselves rather inconspicuous and unaffected by researchers who locate and observe them. In consequence, the trace data are largely free of any reactive measurement effects. However, interpreting these physical traces and affixing meaning is problematic and may severely bias research findings. It is often advised that researchers must always remember to obtain corroboration.

Unobtrusive measures actually make up a particularly interesting and innovative strategy for collecting and assessing data. In some instances, unobtrusive indicators provide access to aspects of social settings and their inhabitants that are simply unreachable through any other means. To some extent, all the unobtrusive strategies amount to examining and assessing human traces. What people do, how they behave and structure their daily lives, and even how humans are affected by certain ideological stances can all be observed in traces people either intentionally or inadvertently leave behind. The more unusual types of unobtrusive studies are sometimes briefly highlighted in textbook descriptions of unobtrusive measures-just before dismissing these techniques in favour of measures regarded as more legitimate.

Unobtrusive method: Human traces as vital data sources:

There are two distinct categories of human traces: (1) *erosion measures* (indicators of wearing down or away) and (2) *accretion measures* (indicators of accumulation or build-up). An example is Pullen et al.'s (2000) unobtrusive study of discarded 'cheat sheets' in universities in which students unwittingly provide valuable research data by leaving their cheating notes behind after exams. Because these traces have been left behind without the producers' knowledge of their potential usefulness to social scientists, these pieces of research information are *non-reactively produced*. *Physical Erosion measures* are indicators of 'wearing down or away' of left behind evidences or items, while *accretion measures* are indicators of accumulation or build-up of left behind items or evidences. These thus bring us to the various advantages and disadvantages of the unobtrusive method as one of the qualitative methods in qualitative research.

Advantages of unobtrusive methods

There are several advantages in making use of unobtrusive methods in social research. One among others is the:

a. Freedom of Interference

First, by definition, Unobtrusive methods do not require intrusion into the lives of participants by investigators. This is because most unobtrusive data have been created by people and left as either residue or erosion-but without the intention of leaving research data. Other data-collection strategies, including focus group interviews, are quite intentional and invasive. With most unobtrusive data strategies, no subjects need be involved during the actual course of the research. There are some types of unobtrusive data collection, however, in which subjects may be more actively involved than in others. For example, if researchers ask a group of traders to deliberately construct their life experiences in the market place, as a subject their lives would have been intruded upon, knowingly or not by the researcher.

b. Passiveness

Unobtrusive data may include limited elements that provide insight into the cognitive or psychological lives of individuals. However, there is no interaction between subjects or between subject and investigator. Unlike focus groups, participant observation or other forms of interviewing, unobtrusive strategies are passive rather than dynamic.

c. **Historicity**

If one is interested in investigating how people have lived under certain situations or in specific settings, there may be a number of viable unobtrusive strategies available. Even if you wanted to know how people acted and their attitudes during some event or time, unobtrusive tactics could be used. But, by their very nature, unobtrusive data usually are historical. That is, information is created at one time but identified as data at some later time. For instance data collected in 2008 on children born during the Nigerian civil war of 1967 revealed the stigmatisation emanating from the names given to them by their parents in later years in memory of the war (Ikuomola, 2011). Thus through this method of research, the impact of historical events on human beings were unravelled.

d. **Fairly low cost**

Though unobtrusive method remains stronger in the realm of the surface level analysis, it however shares an overlapping interest with focus group interviews in comprehending the biographical experiences of people in any environment, while focus group interviews possess the ability to effectively alternate between surface and deep levels analysis. Decisions about whether to use unobtrusive measures over others will be made for several reasons. The most obvious is the level of life structure a researcher wishes to examine. Another, again, may be finance. Here, however, you are likely to find that unobtrusive measures, like focus group interviews, can be created at fairly low cost. A researcher might consider innovatively combining the two, as in the group diary. Such a strategy allows both a variation on triangulation and a means for assessing both surface and deep levels of participants' lives. The decision a researcher makes when selecting a method of research over the other, of course, is often based on what the researcher is willing to give up or trade off.

For instance, a researcher must be willing to trade off emergent observations in a natural setting (using other obtrusive method, participant observation and focus group discussions), for concentrated interactions in a short time frame. This is likely not the sort of decision that you will make strictly on the basis of financial and time costs. Roth (1966) suggests that costs largely depend upon how much of the research is done or will be done by "hired hands" and how much by the researcher. Similarly, costs will be affected by whether or not subjects are paid for their involvement in the study. Largely, such decisions are made on the basis of the value placed on

theadvantages or disadvantages of a method over another. Also, decisions will be affected by the research topic itself and the specific interests, values, background, and training of the researcher (Sussman et al. 1991; Fern, 1982).

Disadvantages and Critique of the Unobtrusive Methods

The unobtrusive methods or strategies are quite good at identifying surface level structures of life, most are not adequate for uncovering deep-level lifestructures. Thus what the unobtrusive method lacks in unravelling germane issues which can only be revealed through interactions with people (research subjects) can be adjusted through the use of focus-group-like activities which enables deep interaction. By sharing information, thoughts, and common problems and suggesting solutions one to the other, group diaries or focus group discussion effectively become unguided but robust. Their discourse, then, amounts to a similar synergistically created convergence of ideas and experiences. Such discussions and biographical information provides researchers with the structure of the writers' lives. Biographical experiences are culturally influenced and created. Every culture affects its members' self-perceptions and understanding about social roles, social institutions, and social structures.

According to Denzin (1989:39), biographical experiences have effects at two levels in a person's life: the surface level and the deep level. On the surface level, effects may be barely felt, noticed, or misinterpreted. They are often taken for granted and are non-disruptive. For example picking up a vase of red flowers on the way home from work might not necessarily mean an atmosphere of love is ready to be ignited somewhere. Effects at the deep level, however, strike at the core of an individual's life. They have a strong hold over the individual and affect how we behave, think, and understand things. Acceptance of our temperament, sexuality, self-hate, grief and other deep-rooted epiphanies serve to illustrate deep-level lifestructures. In relation to obtrusive method such as the Focus groups, provide avenues to understand a variety of deep structural elements. For instance, Twiggs (1994) and Grant (1993) suggest that focus groups can be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of court cases, and even to determine important issues in particular cases. Knowing why a judge gave a verdict and the implication such verdicts have on a people cannot be unravelled without direct interactions with the people or at least the judge. Grant further suggests that information culled from focus groups may assist attorneys in selecting juries during *voir dire*.

Unobtrusive strategies and focus group interviews share an overlapping interest in the biographical experiences of group members and group dynamics. For the most part, unobtrusive measures remain in the realm of the surface level. On the other hand, focus group interviews possess the ability to effectively alternate between surface and deep levels. There are key underlining factors a researcher needs to note whether to make use of the unobtrusive measures or the obtrusive methods. First is the level of life structure therein to be investigated. Secondly may be finance. In this case the researcher is likely to find that unobtrusive measures, like other strategies, can be incorporated in a research at a fairly low cost. One might also consider innovatively combining both the unobtrusive and obtrusive methods, making use of interviews, surveys and observations. Thus the concept of triangulation comes handy which allows the meandering and gathering of data at the surface and deep levels of participants' lives. Unobtrusive method in social science research demonstrates that data can be collected from various traces and records created or left behind by humans. Many types of unobtrusive data provide avenues for the study of subjects that might otherwise be very difficult or impossible to investigate (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979; Glassner & Hertz, 1999).

Conclusion

Unobtrusive methods in social research are very interesting and useful in many ways, but they are only one of several possible research strategies that should be used in concert. Similarly these methods highlight the benefits of using materials that have not been specifically designed for research purposes. Using the unobtrusive methods researchers are empowered to make sense of a range of complex and messy fragments of information. All of these potential advantages rely heavily on observing many of the limitations and benefits of non-reactive, unobtrusive measurement. This is not to reprimand or discourage other research methodologies, but merely a reiteration of an earlier suggestion relating to triangulation in social sciences that a single, controlled approach to researching social issues has its own imperfections. In addition, unobtrusive methods are likely to present researchers with opportunities for deriving innovative means of exploring relevant social issues and developing a complementary approach to social research.

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