Observational Methods

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Compare quantitative and qualitative methods of describing behavior.
- Describe naturalistic observation and discuss methodological issues such as participation and concealment.
- Describe systematic observation and discuss methodological issues such as the use of equipment, reactivity, reliability, and sampling.
- Describe the features of a case study.
- Describe archival research and the sources of archival data: statistical records, survey archives, and written records.
All scientific research requires careful observation. In this chapter, we will explore a variety of observational methods including observing behavior in natural settings, asking people to describe their behavior (self-report), and examining existing records of behavior, such as census data or hospital records. Because so much research involves surveys using questionnaires or interviews, we cover the topic of survey research separately in Chapter 7. Before we describe these methods in detail, it will be helpful to understand the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods of describing behavior.

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

Observational methods can be broadly classified as primarily quantitative or qualitative. Qualitative research focuses on people behaving in natural settings and describing their world in their own words; quantitative research tends to focus on specific behaviors that can be easily quantified (i.e., counted). Qualitative researchers emphasize collecting in-depth information on a relatively few individuals or within a very limited setting; quantitative investigations generally include larger samples. The conclusions of qualitative research are based on interpretations drawn by the investigator; conclusions in quantitative research are based upon statistical analysis of data.

To more concretely understand the distinction, imagine that you are interested in describing the ways in which the lives of teenagers are affected by working. You might take a quantitative approach by developing a questionnaire that you would ask a sample of teenagers to complete. You could ask about the number of hours they work, the type of work they do, their levels of stress, their school grades, and their use of drugs. After assigning numerical values to the responses, you could subject the data to a quantitative, statistical analysis. A quantitative description of the results would focus on such things as the percentage of teenagers who work and the way this percentage varies by age. Some of the results of this type of survey are described in Chapter 7.

Suppose, instead, that you take a qualitative approach to describing behavior. You might conduct a series of focus groups in which you gather together groups of 8 to 10 teenagers and engage them in a discussion about their perceptions and experiences with the world of work. You would ask them to tell you about the topic using their own words and their own ways of thinking about the world. To record the focus group discussions, you might use a videotape recorder or have a transcript prepared later, or you might have observers take detailed notes during the discussions. A qualitative description of the findings would focus on the themes that emerge from the discussions and the manner in which the teenagers conceptualized the issues. Such description is qualitative because it is expressed in nonnumerical terms using language and images.

Other methods, both qualitative and quantitative, could also be used to study teenage employment. For example, a quantitative study could examine
data collected from the state Department of Economic Development; a qualitative researcher might work in a fast-food restaurant as a management trainee. Keep in mind the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches to describing behavior as you read about other specific observational methods discussed in this chapter. Both approaches are valuable and provide us with different ways of understanding behavior.

**NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION**

Naturalistic observation is sometimes called *field work* or simply *field observation* (see Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). In a naturalistic observation study, the researcher makes observations of individuals in their natural environments (the field). This research approach has roots in anthropology and the study of animal behavior and is currently widely used in the social sciences to study many phenomena in all types of social and organizational settings. Thus, you may encounter naturalistic observation studies that focus on employees in a business organization, members of a sports team, patrons of a bar, students and teachers in a school, or prairie dogs in a colony in Arizona.

Sylvia Scribner's (1997) research on “practical thinking” is a good example of naturalistic observation research in psychology. Scribner studied ways that people in a variety of occupations make decisions and solve problems. She describes the process of this research: “... my colleagues and I have driven around on a 3 a.m. milk route, helped cashiers total their receipts and watched machine operators logging in their production for the day... we made detailed records of how people were going about performing their jobs. We collected copies of all written materials they read or produced—everything from notes scribbled on brown paper bags to computer print-outs. We photographed devices in their working environment that required them to process other types of symbolic information—thermometers, gauges, scales, measurement instruments of all kinds” (Scribner, 1997, p. 223). One aspect of thinking that Scribner studied was the way that workers make mathematical calculations. She found that milk truck drivers and other workers make complex calculations that depend on their acquired knowledge. For example, a delivery invoice might require the driver to multiply 32 quarts of milk by $.68 per quart. To arrive at the answer, drivers use knowledge acquired on the job about how many quarts are in a case and the cost of a case; thus, they multiply 2 cases of milk by $10.88 per case. In general, the workers that Scribner observed employed complex but very efficient strategies to solve problems at work. More important, the strategies used could often not be predicted from formal models of problem solving. The Scribner research had a particular emphasis on people making decisions in their everyday environment. Scribner has since expanded her research to several different occupations and many types of decisions.

Other naturalistic research may examine a narrower range of behaviors. For example, Graham and her colleagues observed instances of aggression that occurred
in bars in a large city late on weekend nights (Graham, Tremblay, Wells, Pernanen, Purcell, & Jelley, 2006). Both the Scribner and the Graham studies are instances of naturalistic research because the observations were made in natural settings and the researchers did not attempt to influence what occurred in the settings.

**Description and Interpretation of Data**

The goal of naturalistic observation is to provide a complete and accurate picture of what occurred in the setting, rather than to test hypotheses formed prior to the study. To achieve this goal, the researcher must keep detailed field notes—that is, write or dictate on a regular basis (at least once each day) everything that has happened. Field researchers rely on a variety of techniques to gather information, depending on the particular setting. In the Graham et al. (2006) study in bars, the observers were alert to any behaviors that might lead to an incident of aggression. They carefully watched and listened to what happened. They immediately made notes on what they observed; these were later given to a research coordinator. In other studies, the observers might interview key “informants” to provide inside information about the setting, talk to people about their lives, and examine documents produced in the setting, such as newspapers, newsletters, or memos. In addition to taking detailed field notes, researchers conducting naturalistic observation usually use audio or video recordings.

The researcher’s first goal is to describe the setting, events, and persons observed. The second, equally important goal is to analyze what was observed. The researcher must interpret what occurred, essentially generating hypotheses that help explain the data and make them understandable. Such an analysis is done by building a coherent structure to describe the observations. The final report, although sensitive to the chronological order of events, is usually organized around the structure developed by the researcher. Specific examples of events that occurred during observation are used to support the researcher’s interpretations.

A good naturalistic observation report will support the analysis by using multiple confirmations. For example, similar events may occur several times, similar information may be reported by two or more people, and several different events may occur that all support the same conclusion.

The data in naturalistic observation studies are primarily qualitative in nature; that is, they are the descriptions of the observations themselves rather than quantitative statistical summaries. Such qualitative descriptions are often richer and closer to the phenomenon being studied than are statistical representations. However, it is often useful to also gather quantitative data. Depending on the setting, data might be gathered on income, family size, education levels, age, or gender of individuals in the setting. Such data can be reported and interpreted along with qualitative data gathered from interviews and direct observations.

**Issues in Naturalistic Observation**

**Participation and concealment** Two related issues facing the researcher are whether to be a participant or nonparticipant in the social setting.
and whether to conceal his or her purposes from the other people in the setting. Do you become an active participant in the group or do you observe from the outside? Do you conceal your purposes or even your presence, or do you openly let people know what you are doing?

A nonparticipant observer is an outsider who does not become an active part of the setting. In contrast, a participant observer assumes an active, insider role. Because participant observation allows the researcher to observe the setting from the inside, he or she may be able to experience events in the same way as natural participants. Friendships and other experiences of the participant observer may yield valuable data. A potential problem with participant observation, however, is that the observer may lose the objectivity necessary to conduct scientific observation. Remaining objective may be especially difficult when the researcher already belongs to the group being studied or is a dissatisfied former member of the group. Remember that naturalistic observation requires accurate description and objective interpretation with no prior hypotheses. If a researcher has some prior reason to either criticize people in the setting or give a glowing report of a particular group, the observations will likely be biased and the conclusions will lack objectivity.

Should the researcher remain concealed or be open about the research purposes? Concealed observation may be preferable because the presence of the observer may influence and alter the behavior of those being observed. Imagine how a nonconcealed observer might alter the behavior of high school students in many situations at a school. Thus, concealed observation is less reactive than nonconcealed observation because people are not aware that their behaviors are being observed and recorded. Still, nonconcealed observation may be preferable from an ethical viewpoint: Consider the invasion of privacy when researchers hid under beds in dormitory rooms to discover what college students talk about (Henle & Hubbell, 1938). Also, people often quickly become used to the observer and behave naturally in the observer's presence. This fact allows documentary filmmakers to record very private aspects of people's lives, as was done in the 2009 British documentary Love, Life, and Death in a Day. The filmmaker, Sue Bourne, contacted funeral homes to find families willing to be filmed throughout their grieving over the death of a loved one.

The decision of whether to conceal one's purpose or presence depends on both ethical concerns and the nature of the particular group and setting being studied. Sometimes a participant observer is nonconcealed to certain members of the group, who give the researcher permission to be part of the group as a concealed observer. Often a concealed observer decides to say nothing directly about his or her purposes but will completely disclose the goals of the research if asked by anyone. Nonparticipant observers are also not concealed when they gain permission to "hang out" in a setting or use interview techniques to gather information. In actuality, then, there are degrees of participation and concealment: A nonparticipant observer may not become a member of the group, for example, but may over time become accepted as a friend or simply part of the ongoing activities of the group. In sum, researchers who use naturalistic
observation to study behavior must carefully determine what their role in the setting will be.

You may be wondering about informed consent in naturalistic observation. Recall from Chapter 3 that observation in public places when anonymity is not threatened is considered exempt research. In these cases, informed consent may not be necessary. Moreover, in nonconcealed observation, informed consent may be given verbally or in written form. Nevertheless, researchers must be sensitive to ethical issues when conducting naturalistic observation. Of particular interest is whether the observations are made in a public place with no clear expectations that behaviors are private. For example, should a neighborhood bar be considered public or private?

**Limits of naturalistic observation** Naturalistic observation obviously cannot be used to study all issues or phenomena. The approach is most useful when investigating complex social settings both to understand the settings and to develop theories based on the observations. It is less useful for studying well-defined hypotheses under precisely specified conditions.

Field research is also very difficult to do. Unlike a typical laboratory experiment, field research data collection cannot always be scheduled at a convenient time and place. In fact, field research can be extremely time-consuming, often placing the researcher in an unfamiliar setting for extended periods. In the Graham et al. (2006) investigation of aggression in bars, observers spent over 1,300 nights in 118 different bars (74 male-female pairs of observers were required to accomplish this feat).

Also, in more carefully controlled settings such as laboratory research, the procedures are well defined and the same for each participant, and the data analysis is planned in advance. In naturalistic observation research, however, there is an ever-changing pattern of events, some important and some unimportant; the researcher must record them all and remain flexible in order to adjust to them as research progresses. Finally, the process of analysis that follows the completion of the research is not simple (imagine the task of sorting through the field notes of every incident of aggression that occurred on over 1,300 nights). The researcher must repeatedly sort through the data to develop hypotheses to explain the data and then make sure all data are consistent with the hypotheses. Although naturalistic observation research is a difficult and challenging scientific procedure, it yields invaluable knowledge when done well.

**SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION**

**Systematic observation** refers to the careful observation of one or more specific behaviors in a particular setting. This research approach is much less global than naturalistic observation research. The researcher is interested in only a few very specific behaviors, the observations are quantifiable, and the researcher frequently has developed prior hypotheses about the behaviors.
For example, Bakeman and Brownlee (1980; also see Bakeman, 2000) were interested in the social behavior of young children. Three-year-olds were videotaped in a room in a “free play” situation. Each child was taped for 100 minutes; observers viewed the videotapes and coded each child’s behavior every 15 seconds, using the following coding system:

**Unoccupied:** Child is not doing anything in particular or is simply watching other children.

**Solitary play:** Child plays alone with toys but is not interested in or affected by the activities of other children.

**Together:** Child is with other children but is not occupied with any particular activity.

**Parallel play:** Child plays beside other children with similar toys but does not play with the others.

**Group play:** Child plays with other children, including sharing toys or participating in organized play activities as part of a group of children.

Bakeman and Brownlee were particularly interested in the sequence or order in which the different behaviors were engaged in by the children. They found, for example, that the children rarely went from being unoccupied to engaging in parallel play. However, they frequently went from parallel to group play, indicating that parallel play is a transition state in which children decide whether to interact in a group situation.

### Coding Systems

Numerous behaviors can be studied using systematic observation. The researcher must decide which behaviors are of interest, choose a setting in which the behaviors can be observed, and most important, develop a **coding system**, such as the one described, to measure the behaviors. Rhoades and Stocker (2006) describe the use of the Marital Interaction Video Coding System. Couples are recorded for 10 minutes as they discuss an area of conflict; they then discuss a positive aspect of their relationship for 5 minutes. The video is later coded for hostility and affection displayed during each 5 minutes of the interaction. To code hostility, the observers rated the frequency of behaviors such as “blames other” and “provokes partner.” Affection behaviors that were coded included “expresses concern” and “agrees with partner.”

### Methodological Issues

**Equipment** We should briefly mention several methodological issues in systematic observation. The first concerns equipment. You can directly observe behavior and code it at the same time; for example, you could directly observe and record the behavior of children in a classroom or couples interacting on campus...
using paper-and-pencil measures. However, it is becoming more common to use video recording equipment to make such observations. Video recorders have the advantage of providing a permanent record of the behavior observed that can be coded later. Your observations can be coded on a clipboard; a stopwatch is sometimes useful for recording the duration of events. Alternatively, computer-based recording devices can be used to code the observed behaviors, as well as to keep track of their duration.

**Reactivity** A second issue is reactivity—the possibility that the presence of the observer will affect people’s behaviors (see Chapter 5). Reactivity can be reduced by concealed observation. Using small cameras and microphones can make the observation unobtrusive, even in situations in which the participant has been informed of the recording. Also, reactivity can be reduced by allowing time for people to become used to the observer and equipment.

**Reliability** Recall from Chapter 5 that reliability refers to the degree to which a measurement reflects a true score rather than measurement error. Reliable measures are stable, consistent, and precise. When conducting systematic observation, two or more raters are usually used to code behavior. Reliability is indicated by a high agreement among the raters. Very high levels of agreement are reported in virtually all published research using systematic observation (generally 80% agreement or higher). For some large-scale research programs in which many observers will be employed over a period of years, observers are first trained using videotapes, and their observations during training are checked for agreement with results from previous observers.

**Sampling** For many research questions, samples of behavior taken over an extended period provide more accurate and useful data than single, short observations. Consider a study on the behaviors of nursing home residents and staff during meals (Stabell, Eide, Solheim, Solberg, and Rustøen, 2004). The researchers were interested in the frequency of different resident behaviors such as independent eating, socially engaged eating, and dependent eating in which help is needed. The staff behaviors included supporting the behaviors of the residents (e.g., assisting, socializing). The researchers could have made observations during a single meal or two meals during a single day. However, such data might be distorted by short-term trends—the particular meal being served, an illness, a recent event such as a death among the residents. The researchers instead sampled behaviors during breakfast and lunch over a period of 6 weeks. Each person was randomly chosen to be observed for a 3-minute period during both meals on 10 of the days of the study. A major finding was that the staff members were most frequently engaged in supporting dependent behavior with little time spent supporting independent behaviors such as socializing. Interestingly, part-time nursing student staff were more likely to support independence.
CASE STUDIES

A case study is an observational method that provides a description of an individual. This individual is usually a person, but it may also be a setting such as a business, school, or neighborhood. A naturalistic observation study is sometimes called a case study, and in fact the naturalistic observation and case study approaches sometimes overlap. We have included case studies as a separate category in this chapter because case studies do not necessarily involve naturalistic observation. Instead, the case study may be a description of a patient by a clinical psychologist or a historical account of an event such as a model school that failed. A psychobiography is a type of case study in which a researcher applies psychological theory to explain the life of an individual, usually an important historical figure (Schultz, 2005). Thus, case studies may use such techniques as library research and telephone interviews with persons familiar with the case but no direct observation at all (Yin, 2009).

Depending on the purpose of the investigation, the case study may present the individual's history, symptoms, characteristic behaviors, reactions to situations, or responses to treatment. Typically, a case study is done when an individual possesses a particularly rare, unusual, or noteworthy condition. One famous case study involved a man with an amazing ability to recall information (Luria, 1968). The man, called "S.," could remember long lists and passages with ease, apparently using mental imagery for his memory abilities. Luria also described some of the drawbacks of S.'s ability. For example, he frequently had difficulty concentrating because mental images would spontaneously appear and interfere with his thinking. Another case study example concerns language development; it was provided by "Genie," a child who was kept isolated in her room, tied to a chair, and never spoken to until she was discovered at the age of 13½ (Curtiss, 1977). Genie, of course, lacked any language skills. Her case provided psychologists and linguists with the opportunity to attempt to teach her language skills and discover which skills could be learned. Apparently, Genie was able to acquire some rudimentary language skills, such as forming childlike sentences, but she never developed full language abilities.

Individuals with particular types of brain damage can allow researchers to test hypotheses (Stone, Cosmides, Tooby, Kroll, & Knight, 2002). The individual in their study, R.M., had extensive limbic system damage. The researchers were interested in studying the ability to detect cheaters in social exchange relationships. Social exchange is at the core of our relationships: One person provides goods or services for another person in exchange for some other resource. Stone et al. were seeking evidence that social exchange can evolve in a species only when there is a biological mechanism for detecting cheaters; that is, those who do not reciprocate by fulfilling their end of the bargain. R.M. completed two types of reasoning problems. One type involved detecting violations of social exchange rules (e.g., you must fulfill a requirement if you receive a particular benefit); the other type focused on nonsocial precautionary action rules (e.g., you must take
this precaution if you engage in a particular hazardous behavior). Individuals with no brain injury do equally well on both types of measures. However, R.M. performed very poorly on the social exchange problems but did well on the precautionary problems, as well as other general measures of cognitive ability. This finding supports the hypothesis that our ability to engage in social exchange relationships is grounded in the development of a biological mechanism that differs from general cognitive abilities.

Case studies are valuable in informing us of conditions that are rare or unusual and thus providing unique data about some psychological phenomenon, such as memory, language, or social exchange. Insights gained through a case study may also lead to the development of hypotheses that can be tested using other methods.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Archival research involves using previously compiled information to answer research questions. The researcher does not actually collect the original data. Instead, he or she analyzes existing data such as statistics that are part of public records (e.g., number of divorce petitions filed), reports of anthropologists, the content of letters to the editor, or information contained in databases. Judd, Smith, and Kidd (1991) distinguish among three types of archival research data: statistical records, survey archives, and written records.

Statistical Records

Statistical records are collected by many public and private organizations. The U.S. Census Bureau maintains the most extensive set of statistical records available, but state and local agencies also maintain such records. In a study using public records, Bushman, Wang, and Anderson (2005) examined the relationship between temperature and aggression. They used temperature data in Minneapolis that was recorded in 3-hour periods in 1987 and 1988; data on assaults were available through police records. They found that higher temperature is related to more aggression; however, this effect was limited to data recorded between 9:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m.

There are also numerous less obvious sources of statistical records, including public health statistics, test score records kept by testing organizations such as the Educational Testing Service, and even sports organizations. Major League Baseball is known for the extensive records that are kept on virtually every aspect of every game and every player. Abel and Kruger (2010) took advantage of this fact to investigate the relationship between positive emotions and longevity. They began with photographs of 230 major league players published in 1952. The photographs were then rated for smile intensity to provide a measure of emotional positivity. The longevity of players who had died by the end of 2009 was then examined in relation to smile intensity. The results indicated that these
two variables are indeed related. Further, ratings of attractiveness were unrelated to longevity.

**Survey Archives**

Survey archives consist of data from surveys that are stored on computers and available to researchers who wish to analyze them. Major polling organizations make many of their surveys available. Also, many universities are part of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR; http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/), which makes survey archive data available. One very useful data set is the General Social Survey (GSS; see their website at http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/), a series of surveys funded by the National Science Foundation. Each survey includes over 200 questions covering a range of topics such as attitudes, life satisfaction, health, religion, education, age, gender, and race. Survey archives are now becoming available via the Internet at sites that enable researchers to analyze the data online. Survey archives are extremely important because most researchers do not have the financial resources to conduct surveys of randomly selected national samples; the archives allow them to access such samples to test their ideas. A study by Robinson and Martin (2009) illustrates how the GSS can be used to test hypotheses. The study examined whether Internet users differed from non-users in their social attitudes. Clearly, the findings would have implications for interpreting the results of surveys conducted via the Internet. The results showed that although Internet users were somewhat more optimistic, there were no systematic differences between those who use and do not use the Internet.

**Written and Mass Communication Records**

Written records are documents such as diaries and letters that have been preserved by historical societies, ethnographies of other cultures written by anthropologists, and public documents as diverse as speeches by politicians or discussion board messages left by Internet users. Mass communication records include books, magazine articles, movies, television programs, and newspapers. An example of archival research using such records is a study of 487 anti-smoking ads that was conducted by Rhodes, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Eno, and Monahan (2009). They found that there were an increasing number of ads attacking the tobacco industry over time and that many of the ads emphasized the negative health impact of smoking. However, few ads attacked claims for the benefits of smoking such as stress reduction or preventing weight gain.

**Content Analysis of Documents**

**Content analysis** is the systematic analysis of existing documents. Like systematic observation, content analysis requires researchers to devise coding systems that raters can use to quantify the information in the documents. Sometimes the coding is quite simple and straightforward; for example, it is easy to code
whether the addresses of the applicants on marriage license applications are the same or different. More often, the researcher must define categories in order to code the information. In the study of smoking ads, researchers had to define categories to describe the ads, for example, attacks tobacco companies or causes cancer. Similar procedures would be used in studies examining archival documents such as speeches, magazine articles, television shows, and reader comments on articles published on the Internet.

The use of archival data allows researchers to study interesting questions, some of which could not be studied in any other way. Archival data are a valuable supplement to more traditional data collection methods. There are at least two major problems with the use of archival data, however. First, the desired records may be difficult to obtain: They may be placed in long-forgotten storage places, or they may have been destroyed. Second, we can never be completely sure of the accuracy of information collected by someone else.

This chapter has provided a great deal of information about important qualitative and quantitative observational methods that can be used to study a variety of questions about behavior. In the next chapter, we will explore a very common way of finding out about human behavior—simply asking people to use self-reports to tell us about themselves.

**ILLUSTRATIVE ARTICLE: OBSERVATIONAL METHODS**

Happiness, according to Aristotle, is the most desirable of all things. In the past few decades, many researchers have been studying predictors of happiness in an attempt to understand the construct.

Mehl, Vazire, Holleran, and Clark (2010) conducted a naturalistic observation on the topic of happiness using electronically activated recorders (a device that unobtrusively records snippets of sound at regular intervals, for a fixed amount of time). In this study, 79 undergraduate students wore the device for four days; 30-second recordings were made every 12.5 minutes. Each snippet was coded as having been taken while the participant was alone or with people. If the participant was with somebody, the recordings were also coded for “small talk” and “substantial talk.” Other measures administered were well-being and happiness.

First, acquire and read the article:


Then, after reading the article, consider the following:

1. What is the research question for this study?
2. Is the basic approach in this study qualitative or quantitative?
Review Questions

3. Is this study an example of concealed or nonconcealed observation? What are the ethical issues present in this study?
4. Do you think that participants would be reactive to this data collection method?
5. How reliable were the coders? How did the authors assess their reliability?
6. How did the researchers operationally define small talk, substantive talk, well-being, and happiness? What do you think about the quality of these operational definitions?
7. Does this study suffer from the problem involving the direction of causation (p. 79)? How so?
8. Does this study suffer from the third-variable problem (p. 80)? How so?
9. Do you think that this study included any confounding variables? Provide examples.
10. Given the topic of this study, what other ways can you think of to conduct this study using an observational method?

Study Terms

Archival research (p. 122)  Participant observation (p. 117)
Case study (p. 121)  Psychobiography (p. 121)
Coding system (p. 119)  Reactivity (p. 120)
Content analysis (p. 123)  Systematic observation (p. 118)
Naturalistic observation (p. 115)

Review Questions

1. What is naturalistic observation? How does a researcher collect data when conducting naturalistic observation research?
2. Why are the data in naturalistic observation research primarily qualitative?
3. Distinguish between participant and nonparticipant observation; between concealed and nonconcealed observation.
4. What is systematic observation? Why are the data from systematic observation primarily quantitative?
5. What is a coding system? What are some important considerations when developing a coding system?
6. What is a case study? When are case studies used? What is a psychobiography?
7. What is archival research? What are the major sources of archival data?
8. What is content analysis?

**Activity Questions**

1. Some questions are more readily answered using quantitative techniques, and others are best addressed through qualitative techniques or a combination of both approaches. Suppose you are interested in how a parent’s alcoholism affects the life of an adolescent. Develop a research question best answered using quantitative techniques and another research question better suited to qualitative techniques. A quantitative question is, “Are adolescents with alcoholic parents more likely to have criminal records?” and a qualitative question is, “What issues do alcoholic parents introduce in their adolescent’s peer relationships?”

2. Devise a simple coding system to do a content analysis of print advertisements in popular magazines. Begin by examining the ads to choose the content dimensions you wish to use (e.g., gender). Apply the system to an issue of a magazine and describe your findings.

3. Read each scenario below and determine whether a case study, naturalistic observation, systematic observation, or archival research was used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Naturalistic observation</th>
<th>Systematic observation</th>
<th>Archival research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researchers conducted an in-depth study with certain 9/11 victims to understand the psychological impact of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001.</td>
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<td>Researchers recorded the time it took drivers in parking lots to back out of a parking stall. They also measured the age and gender of the drivers, and whether another car was waiting for the space.</td>
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<td>Contents of Craigslist personal ads in three major cities were coded to determine whether men and women differ in terms of their self-descriptions.</td>
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### Answers

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<tr>
<td>The researcher spent over a year meeting with and interviewing Aileen Wuornos, the infamous female serial killer who was the subject of the film <em>Monster</em>, to construct a psychobiography.</td>
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<td>Researchers examined unemployment rates and the incidence of domestic violence police calls in six cities.</td>
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<td>A group of researchers studied recycling behavior at three local parks over a 6-month period. They concealed their presence and kept detailed field notes.</td>
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*Answers*

case study, systematic observation, archival research, case study, archival research, naturalistic observation