

Triangulating Research Design

Specifications of differences in overall design between experimental and ethnographic research do not preclude legitimate sharing of data collection strategies

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

highly publicized discrepancy between two ethnographers' studies of the same Mexican village (i.e., Lewis, 1951; Redfield, 1930) as a consequence of the differences in their research designs. Redfield and Lewis addressed different issues, used different methods and time periods, and elicited responses from different segments of the

population. Their studies were conducted from different, unexplicated world views

information acquired from participants in group contexts. Their study indicates that what people say and do varies according to others present at the time.

Delineation of the physical, social, and interpersonal contexts within which data

are gathered enhances the replicability of ethnographic studies. To an extent, these factors are subject to change over time. What may be a center for informal gathering among one group of high school seniors, for example, may be anathema to the succeeding class. Consequently, descriptions of contexts should include function and structure as well as specification of features.

Analytic constructs and premises. Even if a researcher reconstructs the relationships and duplicates the informants and social contexts of a prior study, replication may remain impossible if the constructs, definitions, or units of analysis which informed the original research are idiosyncratic or poorly delineated. Replication requires explicit identification of the assumptions and metatheories that underlie choice of terminology and methods of analysis. For example, the culture concept is defined differently by different researchers. Some use it globally: Linton (1945) identified it as the way of life of a people. Others prefer to define culture more narrowly in terms of observed behavior (e.g., Harris, 1971). Some virtually deny that culture exists

independently as an analytic construct, preferring to examine the minute-by-minute interactions by which shared meanings are negotiated among individuals and small groups (e.g., Furlong, 1976; Gearing, 1973, 1975).

If defined idiosyncratically in a study, major organizing constructs such as these can lead to findings that differ widely in their analysis and interpretation. When

Internal Reliability

Problems of internal reliability in ethnographic studies raise the question of

phenomena rarely remain constant. The ethnographic task is to establish which baseline data remain stable over time and which data change (LeCompte & Goetz, in press). Such change may be recurrent, progressive, cyclic, or aberrant; sources of change and their operation also need to be specified (Appelbaum, 1970; Lofland, 1971). This is facilitated by systematic replication and comparison of baseline data

analogous to the pretest data collected by experimenters

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Unusual observer effects (discussed above as informal social experiments) also may threaten the validity of ethnographic studies. Contrivance effects may distort data gathered: this obtains in situations where the ethnographer plans and executes

some exceptional act in order to elicit responses from subjects. Such strategies may violate the research ethics of participant consent (cf., e.g., Denzin, 1978; Jorgensen, 1971; Rynkiewicz & Spradley, 1976), although inadvertent faux pas and gaffes are less controversial than deliberate manipulations and do provide valuable information on norms and sanctions. Here the researcher must establish that it is the act itself

training also may distort data. For example, disciplinary biases may appear, however implicitly in the categories an investigator chooses as salient for analysis and coding

of ethnographic data, regardless of whether participant-derived categories or researcher-designated constructs are used. Researchers with different theoretical backgrounds may choose to focus on quite different aspects of the data. The strategies discussed above for enhancing the reliability of analytic constructs and premises and

for ensuring the internal reliability of ethnographic studies also contribute to controlling and managing observer analytic biases. Of these, participant reaction and confirmation—conducted through all levels of the ethnographic process—may be most effective in revealing researcher-induced distortions (Wax, 1971).

Selection and regression. In experimental research, control of selection and regres-

retrospectively. All plausible causes are delineated by examination of collected data

depends on elimination of alternative explanations (Campbell, 1979). Denzin (1978) conceptualizes the adequate support of relational generalizations as requiring establishment of time order, covariance, and elimination of rival hypotheses. He assesses participant observation as excellent, good, and fair, respectively, on these three factors.

Elimination of rival explanations mandates control of factors threatening internal validity. It also requires effective and efficient retrieval systems for ethnographic data

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