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Social Science Subjects

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Social science subjects are a mainstay of many fields of research, used to obtain an insight into a particular group of people in their natural environment.

Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists use the technique, called participant observation, to study and analyze the factors that make the group unique.

It is extremely useful for studying the internal relationships in any group or society, the subtle interactions that purely empirical research cannot always pick up.

Participant observation can take many forms. Anthropologists, for example, use direct observation, or participate within the group, to gain a unique insider's insight.

Sociologists and psychologists use interviews, surveys, tests, physical measures, studies of life histories and self-report.

Some social science disciplines, such as anthropology, normally use subjects qualitatively, usually on a case study basis.

Other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, frequently study social science subjects more quantitatively.



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The Advantages of Using Social Science Subjects

There are many advantages to using participation research, and there is little doubt that human research subjects generate excellent data.

- Social science subjects give a unique insight into certain groups, and a first hand account of what influences their unique nature and interpersonal relationships.
- Participant studies are relatively easy to set up, and are very cost-effective when compared to quantitative methods [1].
- The studies, as far as is possible, study the social science subjects in their natural surroundings. Researchers can observe human research subjects going about their normal lives, something that is not possible in a laboratory setting.
- The raw data [2] produced by these studies is extremely valid, because there is little external manipulation, or sacrifices in method, needed to meet the criteria of controlling variables [3] and setting up control groups.

Basically, what you see is what you get with a participant study.

The Disadvantages of Using Social Science Subjects

Nobody questions the value of participant observation, but there are a few pitfalls with the research. Any prospective researcher must be fully aware of the limitations, and be extremely careful to address them within the body of the research [4].

- There is always the chance of observer bias [5], whereas the observer imposes their own expectations onto the subjects. For example, an American social anthropologist studying an Asian immigrant community, in the US, may subconsciously judge them by western values, disregarding their cultural background.
- The very fact that the observer is there will change the behavior of the subjects, and only the exact degree of change is unknown.
- Conversely, the observer can find that their objective position is compromised as they begin to become more intimate with the group. For example, there is a strong chance that an anthropologist living amongst a remote Amazonian tribe could 'turn native' and become too embroiled to step back and see the overall picture.
- The studies generally provide little empirical data [6], so the findings are always open to personal interpretation. This is not a major problem, because rigorous debate to reach understanding is an inherent part of the process.

In participant observation, these disadvantages are unavoidable, and have to be regarded as an integral part of the research. Whilst the experimental design [7] can minimize the effects, it is important that the researcher is aware of the possible implications.

In most research, the scientist generates a hypothesis [8], the focal point of the whole experiment [9]. With participant research, the researcher should, instead, show that they are aware of the limitations **before they** start the observations, reducing the chances of bias [10].

This will allow anybody reading and analyzing the research paper to make a qualified judgment about the quality of the paper and the usefulness of the research.

Ethical Codes Surrounding Social Science Subjects

In any of these fields, ethical considerations [11] and the wellbeing of the participants are the single most important consideration. The researcher must ensure that he causes no harm to the group, and it is generally accepted that honesty is the first parameter; the researcher must be open about purpose and intent.

The ethical considerations concerning permissions, consent [12] and possible suffering are very similar to guidelines governing psychology researchers.

These are the main points:

- Wherever possible, the observer should strive to understand the particular community. This may be a knowledge of the language, or some experience with the culture.

One example would be studying sexuality - whilst the observer need not be gay or lesbian to understand those groups, it does help, giving them a unique insight into the unique difficulties faced by gay communities.

- There must be no chance of causing psychological or physical suffering to the participants, and they should be treated as partners in research. A researcher using human research subjects must avoid the aloof approach required by quantitative methods [1].
- It is vital that the social science subjects are willing participants in the research, and are not coerced or induced into participating through false promises or benefits.
- The social science subjects should be fully informed [12] of the research and the possible implications should be transmitted through a pre-experimental briefing. Verbal and written information, in a language that they understand, should always be sought.
- The participants should be fully informed of how their information will be used, how anonymous the information will be, and for how long it will be stored.
- The participant should be able to withdraw at any stage during the research, and may also ask that all of their information, including film, photographs and testimonials be removed.
- On occasion, the exact nature of the research cannot be revealed to the social science subjects, in case it influences the findings. In this case, the work must be constantly overseen by an independent ethical review panel and peers. In addition, the right to withdraw consent must be maintained.

These ethics are extremely important for maintaining the integrity of participation. It is very easy for researchers using social science subjects to cross the line and cause lasting damage to a group or community.

Historically, the use of ethics have been sloppy in some social science experiments, such as the use of deception [13] in the milgram study [14], the stanford prison experiment [15], the bobo doll experiment [16] or the asch experiment [17]. These studies would probably have been disallowed today.

This is especially important with the number of documentaries following groups or tribes, because it is very easy to stray into attempting to edit unfavorably and sensationalizing footage for ratings. This is the boundary between genuine documentaries and cheap reality

TV.

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