

Naturalistic observation of social interaction

Society



Naturalistic observation is a form of data collection where the researcher assumes the role of an observer, which may be participative or non-participative (Gonnerman, 2007). Either way, this method aims to make studies on organisms' (i. e. human) behaviors in their natural environment, unhindered by control parameters that studies in a laboratory, for example, impose.

It is understandable that human beings, just like other organisms, act differently under the watchful eye of any observer, most especially due to self-consciousness. However, it is also understood that even as we are not under scrutiny (there is an absence of outside scrutiny), in the external environment, in a world beyond our own comfort zone, we still experience a “feeling of being watched”, or the so-called spotlight effect. Hence, naturalistic observation does not guarantee the absence of behavioral alteration, and the best that could probably be hoped for is a decrease in such that may lead to objective conclusions.

In this project, the researcher—myself—chose to make behavioral observations on subjects who are unaware that they are being observed, in the hopes of avoiding possible alterations in their behavior pattern. The setting is the department store, where two girls are shopping for clothes. The behaviors observed during the first twenty minutes are that Girl One is phlegmatic and submissive, in her attempt to avoid conflict; while Girl Two is demanding.

A hypothesis, therefore, was made that Girl Two would speak more often and in a louder voice than Girl One. The results of the second observation,

however, show that Girl Two spoke more often but in hushed tones, and Girl Two was the one who spoke less but in a louder voice. It is therefore concluded that the hypothesis is wrong, and that human behavior could not be readily predicted, only justified.

Naturalistic Observation of Social Interaction

I observed a conversation between two girls shopping for clothes on [please insert time and date of “ observation”]. We are at a department store [should the client wish to insert a particular department store, please do so], standing amid racks of clothing. One has dark hair cropped short near her chin; she was wearing a plain, light-blue, long-sleeved shirt, whom I shall refer to as Girl One. The other girl, Girl Two, has curly, shoulder-length, brown hair, and she was wearing a pink sleeveless shirt with a butterfly embroidered across the chest. There are only a few people about, including myself and the sales lady.

Girl Two picks up a purple sleeveless dress with gray stripes and holds it against herself for her friend to see. Girl One circles around the clothes racks, but does not pick any item out. Girl One slowly turns back around when Girl Two calls her. Girl One goes with Girl Two to the dressing room; Girl One waits outside, leaning on the wall with her feet stretched out in front of her as Girl Two takes her time inside the dressing room. When Girl Two emerges from the dressing room, Girl One looks at her from head to toe and nods her head. All of this takes place during the first ten minutes of the observation. During the second ten minutes, the conversation went like this:

Girl One: “ The dress looks okay, you should buy it.”

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Girl Two: “ Are you sure? Or are you just telling me that so we can go now?”

Girl One: “ No I’m not. Come on, just buy it.”

Girl Two: “ You wouldn’t be pushing me into buying this if it was alright with you to go shopping. You shouldn’t have come.”

Girl One: “ Alright, maybe you’re right. I wanna go now but I don’t wanna spoil your fun so just get on with it and take all your time if need be.”

Girl Two: “ Alright then, just let me choose another dress to compare with this one and we’ll go.”

Girl One: “ Sure, whatever.”

Based on the narrated observations, I have reached a possible hypothesis that one of the girls, Girl Two is probably a demanding sort of person, a domineering persona who can manipulate people like Girl One into doing what she wants. A parallel hypothesis is that Girl Two is a phlegmatic, and slightly submissive persona who simply does not want to be bothered or does not want any conflict, and so goes along with whatever Girl One asks of her. In line with this, I decided to gather observation that would enable me to determine which of the girls would eventually become more exasperated by the other and raise her voice more often, and this girl would be Girl Two, with the demanding character. The parameters I used are of course the number of times that the subject spoke, and the number of times the voice was raised within the 20 minutes of observation.

I followed the girls to their next destination which was a coffee shop, bringing with me a few of my friends to cover me. We sat on the booth next to them, and I proceeded with my 20-minute observation. Based on my notes, Girl Two spoke more often, having used eight opportunities to talk in twenty minutes, whereas Girl One spoke less often, speaking only three times within the time period. However, Girl One raised her voice at all speaking opportunities, while Girl Two never raised her voice and spoke in a lowered voice. I therefore conclude that the hypothesis is wrong—Girl Two, even with her demanding personality, did not raise her voice, and did not seem exasperated by Girl One's passive attitude. Instead, it was Girl One who got "fed up".

The exercise was extremely challenging because first and foremost, I had to pretend that I did not exist. Or at least, assume a role that did not directly participate in their world. In other words, it was as if I was stalking them or spying on them. I had to persuade my friends to come with me and serve as my "cover". I was also nervous because if I did not do well with pretending I was also looking at the dresses, or recording some descriptions about the clothes in my notebook and not about them, I probably would be blacklisted in that department store. It was challenging also, to keep my mind off formulating biased opinions; I had to concentrate on being the "unattached" social scientist role.

One insight I have learned is that even some personalities that seem to clash all the time somehow complement each other and form what they call a "love-hate" relationship that defies all odds and expectations. And another is that human behavior, although inferences may be made out of them, can

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never be truly predicted by an outside observer because there are other factors to consider than the setting, and whatever is in the natural environment of observation at that point in time. One has to consider what happened before the trip to the mall which upset Girl One so greatly, so much so that she belied expectations.

Through this exercise, I have learned that nonverbal behavior is hard to observe and describe without biases, or forming opinions about them. However, when I do try to formulate opinions, I find that nonverbal behavior gives an insight into what the subject may be thinking as much the same way as verbal behavior would. Either way, human behavior can never be predicted; we can only understand the why's and how's surrounding a certain action and reaction.

Reference

Gonnerman (2007). Surveys and Naturalistic Observation. Retrieved February 9 2008 from [http:// fp. uni. edu](http://fp.uni.edu) (2007)