

Bonus Table 6.E

Strengths and Weaknesses of Observational Data

Strengths of observational data

- Allows one to directly see what people do without having to rely on what they say they do.
- Provides firsthand experience, especially if the observer participates in activities.
- Can provide relatively objective measurement of behavior (especially for standardized observations).
- Observer can determine what does not occur.
- Observer may see things that escape the awareness of people in the setting.
- Excellent way to discover what is occurring in a setting.
- Helps in understanding importance of contextual factors.
- Can be used with participants with weak verbal skills.
- May provide information on things people would otherwise be unwilling to talk about.
- Observer may move beyond selective perceptions of people in the setting.
- Good for description.
- Provides moderate degree of realism (when done outside of the laboratory).

Weaknesses of observational data

- Reasons for observed behavior may be unclear.
- Reactive effects may occur when respondents know they are being observed (e.g., people being observed may behave in atypical ways).
- Investigator effects (e.g., personal biases and selective perception of observers)
- Observer may “go native” (i.e., over-identifying with the group being studied).
- Sampling of observed people and settings may be limited.
- Cannot observe large or dispersed populations.
- Some settings and content of interest cannot be observed.
- Collection of unimportant material may be moderately high.
- More expensive to conduct than questionnaires and tests.
- Data analysis can be time consuming.