Week 6 Extra Credit

AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY OF GENDER AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Purpose: This exercise involves designing and conducting a naturalistic observation study. It also is designed to allow you to assess the extent to which naturalistic observation may be subject to observer bias.

Instructions: Naturalistic observation is a methodology that allows researchers the opportunity to record and describe behavior as it occurs outside the laboratory. This technique involves these steps: (1) identify the variable to be studied, (2) develop operational definitions of the actual behaviors to be studied, (3) choose a setting within which to observe these behaviors, and (4) observe and record the frequency with which the behaviors occur. Naturalistic observation has an advantage over experimental studies in that behavior is observed (ideally) as it naturally occurs. On the other hand, a number of problems limit the conclusions one can draw from naturalistic observation of behavior. First, behavior might be rated differently by two observers depending upon whether they think they are observing a male or a female. This is especially true in the case of ambiguous behaviors, and precise operational definitions are necessary to reduce the problem of observer bias. Second, it is difficult to ascertain whether behavior in one setting might be generalizable to others. Thus, researchers must consider the effect the situation might have on people's behavior and consider testing this effect by conducting the research again in another setting.

1. First, identify the variable you want to study. Think about easily observed behaviors for which you might expect to find gender differences. For example, courtesy, playing with or caring for children, helping behaviors, aggressiveness in physical activities or sports, etc.

2. Develop one or more operational definitions for this variable. An operational definition clearly describes behavior in a form that is readily observable and measurable. For example, sports-related aggression might be operationalized as the number of tackles in a coed soccer game, or nurturance might be operationalized as the number of times a parent touches a child.

3. Describe the setting in which you have chosen to conduct your naturalistic observation. This might include settings such as a shopping mall, public park, etc.

4. Using the coding sheet below, record your data. Spend at least 90 minutes coding the frequency of behavior. Record the sex of the person performing the target behavior by making a hatch mark in the appropriate column (i.e., when a girl or woman performs the behavior, record the behavior in the "female" column; when a boy or man performs the behavior, record it in the “male” column).

Behavior	Female	Male

5. Summarize your data. Count the number of behaviors in each column. Compute the percentage of behaviors by gender by dividing the number of behaviors in each column by the total number of observations.

6. Interpret your data. Have you found gender differences or similarities? What are your conclusions?

7. Did you experience any difficulties in developing your operational definitions and using them to code behaviors? Did you observe any ambiguous behaviors that were difficult to code? If so, describe.

8. In what way(s) might the setting have affected the behaviors you observed?

9. Did you observe instances of observer bias in yourself? For example, if you saw a man perform a behavior typical of a woman did you ignore it, focus on it, or judge it?

10. What could you do to improve your study and overcome problems of bias?