

Naturalistic Observation of Violence

[1] Introduction

This experiment is designed to look for signs of violence as they occur in everyday, ordinary life.

There are many ways that we become aware of violence in our everyday lives, so the first thing you need to think about is, What will be the source of your observations? You can—and perhaps should—compare different sources, but what is important for this sort of investigation is being consistent, so once you choose what you're going to do, stick with it for the duration, and don't look at anything else! (Why not?)

Since you're going to be looking at the incidence or prevalence of violence (what is the difference?) you need to start with a definition of violence. Again, there are many possible ideas but for these purposes the only important thing is to be clear what you're looking for so that your observations can be consistent. In general, whatever definition you come up with will tell you where you are going to look for your observations, so one way to decide the question is to determine what you want to look at.

- For instance, you might define 'violence' as 'reports on TV news programs of acts of violence against persons', which might include murders, rapes, assaults, acts of terrorism, wars and—perhaps—robberies. (Frankly, you could choose just one of these, too—so long as you're consistent!)

Again, the only thing that is important for this project is consistency, so work up a definition that works for you and make it clear when you do your write up what it is that you looked for.

[2] Protocol

Once you've worked out the definition of violence that you will be using you will know a good deal about what it is you need to do to make your observations. For instance

- If your definition of violence is how often violence is reported in the news, then you will watch some news programs
- If it's how often people talk about violence acts in their everyday conversations, then you might want to station yourself in the student lounge or cafeteria where you can overhear people's conversations
- If it's how many movies in theatres feature violence or violent interactions, then you will check out what is showing at movie theatres right now, or perhaps you will find a source of movie reviews and see how many of the movies reviewed feature violence or are structured around violent interactions (for instance, is the movie about a murder or about a war, or is it about a person who is mugged and what happens to them afterward?)
- If it's about how many times people are shown beating one another up in TV shows, then you will have to watch some TV shows and record how many of them feature such events.

Based on the kinds of observations you want to make, work out where and when you will put yourself to make them. Your task is to be able to say something interesting about how often, how regularly, how consistently, etc, people are exposed to reports or observations of violence.

There are obviously an enormous variety of ways to study this question, so do let your imagination run wild.

[3] Variants

Don't bite off more than you can reasonably chew, but there are many interesting variants of this project you can consider. For instance

- You might make a table of all the TV shows presented over a 24hr period and make note of what percentage of them feature violence; or you might make a table of all the TV shows being presented at different times of day on different channels and make note of what percentage feature violence—and what patterns, if any, you can perceive about when shows with violence in them are presented. Or you might chart what percentage of news time is taken up with reports of violence.
- You might compare different sources of stories or observations of violence. How many news shows present stories about violence vs how many entertainment shows do?

[4] Writing it Up

Once you've made your observations you'll need to write them up.

Start by stating the definition of violence that you used.

Based on the kinds of observations you made, record your results. This is the raw data you will have accumulated and it is usually best to put it into a table.

Explain what you observed in words—what do those raw data show?

Then explain what you conclude about the raw data. What do they show? Dependent on which particular kinds of observations you will have made you will be able to say different things about what your data show, of course, but for this section concentrate on the *patterns* you found.

Next, put your results in the context of psychology. Knowing what you've learned about violence affects people, how do your data fit what you might expect?

What do they suggest about how violence occurs, for instance? Or about how intense attachments may be? If you have observed children of different ages, what light does comparing behaviors at different ages shed on the processes of attachment?

Finally, provide some of your own thinking about the project. What did you learn from it? Which parts,

if any, surprised you, and why? Were your expectations confirmed or were you disappointed? If your data were different from what you expected, what might the explanation be? Was your thinking off the mark, or were there sufficient problems with the experimental protocol you created that you weren't able to make accurate observations? What would you change if you were to do it again? What do the data you found suggest about the next round of experiments to do?

Type 1 thinking tends to treat observations as neutral phenomena. Something happens, our minds register it: It's just data and we move on along unchanged by it. But is this really true? Is exposure to violence just recording what happens, or does it change us? If it changes us, what sorts of changes might occur? Are we put on high alert—and if so, how does that affect us? Does it make us more reactive and hence more prone to respond violently without thinking about the implications ourselves? Which is cause, which effect—are hearing about violence because people are violent creatures, or does hearing about violence make us more likely to act violently?