



## Note on Direct Observation of Purchasing Behavior

Claremont Graduate School Class in Marketing Research

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# Note on Direct Observation of Purchasing Behavior

CLAREMONT GRADUATE SCHOOL CLASS IN MARKETING RESEARCH\*

## REFLECTIONS ON OBSERVATIONAL TECHNIQUES

One of the significant problems of the observational technique is to ensure that the observer acts as a pure recorder rather than one who introduces his perceptual and cognitive screening into the observations. The observer himself is a respondent in that observation requires a behavioral relation between some event available to be observed and some organism that observes or responds to the event. As such, the observer is less of a camera and more of an interpreter. What he observes is translated into what he records, and this translation is again translated by the analyst who determines what the observations really mean. Any analysis of this type and the resultant statistical statements are to be accepted only with caution.

Observing and interpreting behavior is fraught with many difficulties. First is determining whether to observe less detail on more subjects or more detail on fewer subjects; second is discriminating between behavioral details that yield information and should be recorded and those that are extraneous to the usefulness of the study; and third is determining from actual observation what was intended by the behavioral act itself.

In the Barker article referred to by Wells and Lo Sciuto, Barker [1] notes that the techniques of the psychologist as a *transducer* (i.e., docile receiver, coder and transmitter of information) are more difficult to apply than the techniques of the psychologist as an *operator*. This statement is made by an observer who despite his thorough training and much experience spent exorbitant time catching each behavioral detail of his subjects. It appears that an observer may require an inordinate

amount of training to note each detail and then be left with few subjects on which to report.

The second problem, that of deciding what details should be selected for reporting, was discussed by Poincaré [4]. While we do not attempt to explore this issue in the same depth as Poincaré, the problem of selecting the pertinent facts for recording *in the absence of a hypothesis* is essentially the same. And this is of major concern with this technique.

Bartlett points out the difficulties of the third problem, determining the true purpose of the behavioral act [2]:

It is more common for the steps to be reached through the terminal point than for the terminal point to be reached through the steps. We often make a direct leap from the evidence given to an accepted terminal point, and the missing steps are then constructed on the basis of an already accepted issue.

The first problem, that of the determination of the amount of detail to be included, is recognized by Wells and Lo Sciuto [5]. For instance, on page 227 they state:

The only real data collection problem was persuading the observers to include sufficient detail in their records. In practice trials the observers were inclined to record only the bare bones of each transaction, omitting the detail which is the essence of the method. This problem was solved after repeated use of explicit examples.

An example of the second problem is given when the authors note (p. 232) that "Twenty-two percent—more than one in five—of the cereal shoppers and the detergent shoppers spent enough time inspecting the package *to cause the observer to make note of the fact.*" (Italics added) The fact that shoppers inspected the package is a *behavioral* act to be observed. The fact that observers judged the time spent in the act sufficient to make note is a *respondent* act. The observer has not only noted the pure act but is also influenced by its intensity. In this sense the interference by the operator that Wells and Lo Sciuto seem to have avoided

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\* This note was written by the students of the graduate spring course in marketing research given by Professor Kristian Palda: W. Arnold, R. Flanders, H. Heidsman, O. Holcombe, T. Rose, J. Cooper, G. Eyrich, R. Waldo. The last three acted as editors. J. Boyd, the ninth member of the class, wrote a dissenting report which is available on request.

by the use of purely observational techniques rears its head, although in a different form.

The last problem, that of determining the motivation behind the behavioral act, is evident in the reported "Instant Fels" incident. Without the interview, which was combined with the observation, it would have been impossible to determine the true motivation behind the recorded selection of "Instant Fels" soap.

### DISCUSSION

The Summary and Conclusions section of their article states that the direct observational technique can provide answers to questions such as

1. Who actually buys the product, and who influences the choice?
2. To what extent are brand choices made before the shopper enters the store, and to what extent are they made at the point of purchase?
3. How many people check the price?
4. Do shoppers study the package before purchase?

The authors thus ascribe certain attributes to the technique of direct observation. In doing so, they reveal their partial divergence from the paper's apparent concern with purchasing behavior and expose themselves to criticism.

1. We begin with the question, "Who actually buys the product . . . ?" This is manifest behavior, and there is little doubt that it can be recorded accurately. Wells and Lo Sciuto add however, "and who influences the choice?" Choice is a notoriously complex decision process involving multiple influences, the history of pertinent information supplied, and decision rules that are undoubtedly dynamic. Above all, purchasing choice is often dependent on a *collective* household preference function. The nature of some observed influences is unquestionably clear, as with children appealing to parents or wives directing husbands. The general claim, however, is unacceptable. With 63 percent of the shoppers being alone [5, Table 1], unobserved influences can be assumed as often present as not. Without direct questioning, therefore, the broad assertion about influence is unwarranted.

2. With their second listed attribute, the authors again appear to make unsubstantiated claims about factors present in the buying process. They note, for example (p. 230), that at the cereal counter "55 percent seemed to have had what they wanted either written down or in mind." The possibility that the checklist contains *product* rather than *brand* reminders does not appear to occur to the observers. Another tenuous claim is that "attitudes and behavior are only loosely related." As a general principle, we agree with this statement, being fully aware of the complex hierarchy of effects arguments and counterarguments in the advertising literature [3]. Since we do not know, however, by defini-

tion of this research design anything about the undergrowth of the observed buyers' attitudes, we profess surprise at the confidence the authors exhibit in inferring them. (Consider, for instance, one buyer of these 30 percent who hesitated at the cereal counter: his intention may have been to purchase Alphabets with a model of a Mercury "Cougar" included; he found, however, that all boxes containing it were gone. Is this discrepancy between attitude and behavior?)

3. The third claim is the ability to determine "how many people check the price." If people are observed studying prices on the shelf or on the package, it can be accepted that a large percentage of them were, in fact, checking the price. The *failure* to make such an obvious gesture cannot, however, be construed as a failure to check price or a lack of price awareness. The authors' Table 4 assumes perfect correspondence between recorded observations of people checking the price and the shopper's concern with price. Yet they have themselves noted the problems of accurately determining whether a shopper is looking at the price. Even weightier is the matter of assuming unconcern with price on the basis of shoppers *not* looking at price. This view fails to consider either the experienced shopper who sometime in the past took a price comparison and made a decision or the price-conscious shopper who read newspaper and flyer advertisements before he went to the store.

4. Except for who actually buys the product, the last point appears the most valid. "Do shoppers study the package before purchase?" Here no assumptions about attitudes or the purchase decision process are required. Yet even here there is some concern with the *recording* process. "Twenty-two percent—more than one in five—of the cereal shoppers spent enough time inspecting the package to cause the observer to make note of the fact (p. 232)." Actually, we do not know how many shoppers inspected the package but *not* long enough to cause the observer to make note. The conclusion we draw is that actual package awareness is underestimated by some unknown amount as a result of the observer-respondent behavior.

### SUMMARY

An evaluation of the claimed results of the observational method as used by Wells and Lo Sciuto has raised questions of methodology and understanding the purchase decision process. While critical of the methodology used and conclusions drawn by them, we do not wish to suggest that observational methods in marketing research do not have merit. For instance, a pilot study might well use such techniques to indicate possible areas for subsequent detailed investigation.

Finally, several ideas for a semicontrolled observational study appear worth mentioning. To observe the

degree of price consciousness of the consumer, counter price tickets could be removed for a predetermined period. This might force the price-conscious person to look at the price on the package. Similarly, brand choice factors could be judged by moving certain brands or groups of brands from their normal position in the store to a different one. Observation of the amount of searching and inquiring by the customer would clearly yield brand choice information. Such a technique certainly offers a built-in control group activity before the change was made.

## REFERENCES

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2. F. C. Bartlett, *Thinking: An Experimental and Social Study*, New York: Basic Books, 1958.
3. Kristian S. Palda, "The Hierarchy of Effects," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 3 (February 1966), 13-25.
4. Henri Poincaré, *Science and Method*, New York: T. Nelson & Son, 1914.
5. William D. Wells and Leonard A. Lo Sciuto, "Direct Observation of Purchasing Behavior," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 3 (August 1966), 227-33.

## A Reply

WILLIAM D. WELLS and LEONARD A. LO SCIUTO\*

In "Direct Observation of Purchasing Behavior," we discussed an attempt to discover what naturalistic observation might contribute to research on consumer behavior. We described the technique that we had used, mentioned some of its advantages, and detailed the disadvantages revealed by our experience with the method. Since our purpose was to give a balanced appraisal of the method, we welcome the elaboration provided by the Claremont group's comments. We agree with most of their remarks about the difficulties inherent in the method, but we believe that some of their specific criticisms were based on a misinterpretation of our intent.

We agree that "one of the significant problems of the observational technique is to ensure that the observer acts as a pure recorder rather than one who introduces his perceptual and cognitive screening into the observations." We note, however, that this problem is just as serious or perhaps even more serious, in research using interviews. In interview research the interviewer *and* the respondent introduce perceptual and cognitive screening.

We also agree that "observing and interpreting behavior is fraught with many difficulties," such as determining the right amount of detail to include, discriminating between extraneous and significant details, and inferring the respondent's mental state from his behavior.

In commenting on data produced by direct observation, we said, "This means that . . . the results will be subject to the questions and reservations always associated with results based on interpretation and judgment." We did not belabor this point because the questions and restrictions are well known; we did not think it was necessary to repeat what has been said many times. We recognize that such interpretation is hazardous, and then go ahead and do it.

As for the specific criticisms of our interpretations of the data, we believe that most are based on a misinterpretation of what we intended to say. We tried to be sufficiently explicit about the limitations of the method and the tentativeness of the conclusions so that readers would not assume we thought we had uncovered *all* sources of interpersonal influence, *all* factors present in the buying process, or *all* relations between purchase and price; that would have been foolish.

We also hope that other readers did not get the impression that we would rule out any research approach other than direct observation. Quite the contrary. We view observation as a complement, not as a substitute for other research methods.

We claimed then and claim now only that direct observation of purchasing behavior can "supplement and enrich questionnaire results" by providing information that an interviewer might not get. We feel that too much marketing research depends solely on retrospective interviews, and that actual observation of the purchasing process can contribute information that research limited to the interview is apt to miss.

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\* William D. Wells is professor of psychology and marketing, University of Chicago; and Leonard A. Lo Sciuto is assistant professor of psychology, Rutgers, The State University.