

The purpose of the laboratory component of child psychology is twofold. One purpose is to give you experience in naturalistic observation, one of the most widely used research techniques in developmental psychology. Naturalistic observation takes you out of the "lab" and into the "real world" to make systematic observations of behavior. A second purpose is to bring you into contact with children in a structured fashion so that you can see how the theories we read about and discuss in class are true. The theories were developed because someone observed behavior and tried to ascertain why the behavior occurred. They were developed as explanations of observed behavior. Theories about child development (and adolescent and adult development) were not developed in a vacuum.

Faculty Notes will occur throughout this manual. They are hints to faculty about lessons I have learned from using these or similar experiential activities. These FN's can be deleted from student versions of the manual.

Lab Requirements:

- 1) Choose a site from those listed in the syllabus.

(FN: Most daycare centers are very open to having students come and observe since they often end up playing with the children. Additionally, most centers have extended hours which make it easier for students with busy schedules to complete the lab component.)

- 2) Pick a time from the center's times at which you can go weekly. You will spend 1 hour per week at the center. Allow travel time. You must stick to your chosen time unless there is a true emergency or you are sick. (You should not go if you are sick since it is very easy to spread illness through a daycare center. You will need to make up any times you miss.) You must go weekly. You may not cram 12 hours on observation into the end of the semester.

(FN: I collect lab reports every 2-3 weeks so that students are less likely to cram. It is also easier to make certain that students are on track. Additionally, there is less to correct at the end of the semester.)

- 3) If you are sick or have an emergency, call the center so they will not count on you. If there is a school holiday and you will not be going, notify the center a week ahead.
- 4) Log in on the calendar provided. Include arrival and departure times. If you fail to note your times, your attendance may not be counted.

(FN: I buy large desk calendars, one for each site. On the first of each month, I collect the previous month's page. That way I can monitor attendance on a regular basis. Also, Center staff is thus not involved in attendance. Collecting attendance monthly allows me to head off students who wait until the last week of the semester and try to cram in all observations then.)

5) Complete each lab report. There will be two parts to each lab report. Part One consists of the observation notes that you take during your time at the center. These will be collated and bound in a three ring binder. The binder will be turned in at the end of the semester. Part Two consists of reflection questions connected to each observation. This part of the lab report must be turned in by Monday of each week. Remember that an observation week goes from Monday morning through Friday evening. These reports will be returned to you so that they can be inserted in your journal (i.e. notebook). Thus a complete lab manual will include each weekly observation with notes and drawings when applicable plus questions turned in weekly. Remember that questions must be typed. It is helpful to complete the report soon after you return from your observation since your memories of the observations will be sharper.

(FN: I require students to use a 3 ring binder since it is easier to read the labs at the end of the semester.)

Make sure you go prepared when you go to observe. Take paper and pen as well as a copy of that week's lab. Read over the lab before going so you are clear about your assignment. Some labs may require you to make copies of observation sheet or to bring some materials with you. If you fail to prepare for the lab, you will not be able to complete some labs.

INTRODUCTION TO NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

Naturalistic observation is one of the most common forms of experimentation used in developmental research. In naturalistic observation, you go to the setting in which the behavior takes place and observe "subjects or participants" in that setting. For instance, if you want to observe the behavior of shoppers, you would go to a mall or a store to conduct a naturalistic observation.

Researchers and theorists believe that observing in a naturalistic setting enables researchers to see behavior that is natural and not contrived. Studies conducted in a laboratory setting may not reflect actual behavior. Studies conducted in naturalistic setting should reflect "actual" behavior and not behavior that is intended to please the researcher.

One caution: As an observer, you are an extra piece of that environment, one that is not a "natural" part of the environment. As such, your mere presence may change or distort the behavior and thus your results. If the researchers can observe and the participants don't know the observer is there (such as from behind a 2-way mirror), these changes may be minimal. When the observer is part of the group, even merely sitting on the periphery, behavior changes may occur. Remember how differently you behaved in elementary school when the principal came in to observe the teacher. Since you will be interacting with the children and assisting teachers if they need help, or at the very least sitting where you can be seen, you become what is known as a participant-observer.

As a participant-observer, it can be difficult to maintain the objectivity that is the goal of research. Without objectivity it is hard to draw reasonable conclusions. Without objectivity, we tend to draw more favorable conclusions when we like someone or some event and unfavorable conclusions when we dislike the person or event. Remember the fundamental attribution error and think about how you explain away bad behavior in which you participate. Generally we make excuses for such behavior. You will need to work hard at maintaining objectivity when you are acting as observer/researcher and try not to let emotions influence your analysis. This is not easy, however, so it will take some effort.

At the conclusion of the laboratory experience, you should have a better appreciation of how hard it is to describe and classify behavior and how difficult observational research is. The assignments are designed to help you focus your attention on various behaviors that we will discuss throughout the semester.

The first and most basic skill is that of objective observation. This means recording exactly what you see without any editorializing or judging about what the behavior means. In objective observation you do not attribute feelings or meaning to your observations. Instead, you are to merely write down what you see.

- e.g. Bobby threw himself on the floor, kicking and screaming.
- Joan jumped up and down and laughed when her mother came in.
- Susan yawns and sits at the table without touching the crayons.

These are examples of good observations. They record only what the observer sees.

e.g. Bobby threw himself on the floor in a rage.

Joan was glad to see her mother.

Susan is tired this morning.

These are examples of subjective, poor observations. The observer is making inferences about why the child behaves as he or she does. **Good observers** avoid making those judgements. Again, record only what you see. The subjective analysis will come later.

LEVELS OF OBSERVATION

We can observe at the molecular level or the gross level.

The gross level is a very general level. It means we only look at broad behaviors, ignoring the details.

e.g. Bryan sat and colored for 15 minutes.

The molecular level means that we look for details, even minute, seemingly unimportant ones. We record everything, although some details may appear unnecessary.

e.g. Bryan turned his head toward the crayon, lifted his arm from his side to the level of the table, bent his arm at the elbow, extended his hand and placed it on the crayon and so on.

We don't need usually that level of detailed description. A more appropriate observation would be:

e.g. Bryan went to the drawing table and sat down. He spent approximately 2 minutes coloring, using 4 different colors. A crayon broke when he pressed down on it. Bryan threw the crayon down, got up and ran outside.

Note that an observation should include:

1. situation in which the behavior occurs
2. people involved in the behavior
3. description of the behavior.

(However, we make no judgments about why the behavior occurs. We don't say Bryan got angry and threw the crayon down. Anger is inferred but we don't record that inference during our observation.)

We record only what we see.

After the observation, we go back and make some interpretations about what we have observed and recorded.

e.g. Bryan appeared to be drawing a person although the drawing included a lot of scribbling. His motor control isn't very good compared to other children his age. He got angry over breaking the crayon, a fairly typical behavior for a child his age.

When you make the interpretation of the behaviors that you observed, you want to refer back to the appropriate theory and section of the textbook. Think about whether or not the behavior is typical of that age group. Are there any environmental factors that might have influenced the behavior such as time of day or weather? Are the regular teachers there? Why did the child behave that way? In your interpretation you are attempting to explain the behavior. The observation is the descriptive component; the interpretation is the explanatory component.

Interpretations are not mere speculation, however. They are based on evidence and experience. Your evidence will come from the text or other course materials. Experience will come with spending time with children. When you make your interpretations, they should be reasonable explanations of the behavior.

PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Work in pairs on this assignment. Together choose a place where there are a large number of people. For 10 minutes, just watch the people to get a sense of the type of activities. For the next 5 minutes, each of you is to record the behavior you observe. Include identifying information such as the female in the red scarf or the male in a black leather jacket. During this time you should not consult one another.

Next, compare your observations. Did you see the same things? Did either of you make subjective observations?

Try this experiment again for 10 more minutes.

Compare results again.

In a 1 page report, explain what you saw as well as any problems with your observational skills.

This activity will help you prepare for your first observation at the daycare center. You can practice these skills while watching people at the Union or even on television.

Observing is a skill that takes time to develop. As a novice observer, be patient and recognize that it takes time to develop these skills. As you progress through the semester, your skills should improve.

