

A NOTE ON OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES OF DRINKING AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

The concept of observational studies covers a wide variety of approaches and possible subject-matters. We can observe objects, or spatial relations, or individual behaviors, or interactions. The observations can be reported as a straightforward description, in formalistic or structural terms, or in quantitative terms. All these kinds of topics and approaches have been used in alcohol studies. Observational studies are taken here to exclude studies requiring some response -- to a questionnaire, etc. -- from those studied.

It should be noted that many studies, even those calling themselves "observational" studies, use a mixture of methods. The boundary between eliciting conversation by a participant observer and unstructured inquiries by an interviewer is faint indeed. An increasing number of studies explicitly use a diversity of methodologies, including observational, in their design.

In the present note, we will mention only briefly observational studies of objects and spatial relations, although they are important areas for attention.

(1) A number of studies have mapped the number, types and locations of drinking establishments in the community, in discussing their functions and social position (See Calkins, 1901, first edition; Mass Observation, 1943; Pfautz and Hyde, 1960; Cavan, 1966).

(2) A few studies have mapped and discussed the spatial arrangements inside drinking establishments, and their implications (e.g. Mass Observation, 1943; Sommer, 1969).

(3) A few studies have counted and mapped the detritus of drinking -- beer

cans, bottles, etc. Counting the litter in a given area is a cheap, unobtrusive way of monitoring changes in drinking patterns. One study in Arizona uses archaeological methods to examine nutritional patterns as revealed in people's garbage -- including drinking patterns (Harrison et al., 1974).

Observational studies of behaviors and interactions can be divided into laboratory studies and studies of people in their "natural" settings. We will not here concern ourselves with laboratory observational studies, except to remark that a recent comparative observational study showed quantitative differences in behavior in the two types of settings (Billings et al., 1976). The classic studies by Bruun (1959a; 1959b) fall on the borderline between the two types, since he used natural groups and to the extent possible naturalistic settings in a laboratory observational study of drinking behavior (see also Williams, 1964; McClelland et al., 1972).

The literature on naturalistic observational studies of drinking-related behavior and interactions falls into a number of major traditions, according to topic.

(1) The large tradition of anthropological studies of drinking in traditional cultures contains many observational studies. A lengthy bibliography of anthropological drinking studies has been compiled by Heath (1976). The typical study in this tradition makes an overall characterization of drinking customs and institutions in the culture under study. There are a smaller number of studies in the same tradition characterizing drinking customs and institutions in industrialized cultures, although these studies usually focus on non-industrial, non-urban segments of the culture -- typically the small town (e.g., Stone, 1962; Warriner, 1958; Honigmann, 1963; Hatch, 1973). These latter studies draw both on anthropological traditions and on the lively tradition of the small-town study which flourished particularly among U.S. sociologists in the 1930's - 1950's.

(2) There is by now a large literature of observational studies in taverns and other public drinking places. See the following references: Calkins, 1901; Selley, 1927;

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Stolte, 1937-1938; Mass Observation, 1943; Lorenzo, 1953; Gottlieb, 1957; Richards, 1963-64; Sommer, 1965; Cavan, 1966; Dumont, 1967; Roebuck and Spray, 1967; Ossenberg, 1969; Kim, 1973; Kessler and Gomberg, 1974; Cutler and Storm, 1975; Kruse, 1975; LeMasters, 1975; Spradley and Mann, 1975; Harford et al., 1976; Roebuck and Frese, 1976; Kotarba, 1977; Plant et al., 1977.

Some of these studies are oriented around characterizing the tavern as an institution, and some around exploring sociability in the tavern. A spate of recent articles has been concerned with quantifying the pattern and amount of drinking under different circumstances. A scattering of studies in the tavern and anthropological literatures have been concerned with drinking in festivals or other special occasions (e.g. Ossenberg, 1969; Listiak, 1974).

(3) There is a tradition of observational studies of skid-row and street drinking and norms among chronic inebriates; e.g. Jackson and Connor, 1953; Rooney, 1961; Dumont, 1967; Rubington, 1968, 1971; Spradley, 1970, 1972a, 1972b; Siegal, 1971. These studies draw on the much older sociological tradition of social surveys on homeless men (see Bahr, 1970).

(4) Studies of drinking in private places have been very rare. The one substantial U.S. attempt reported substantial ethical and methodological difficulties with such a study (Riesman and Watson, 1964).

(5) There have been some observational studies of interactions in treatment and other social response agencies; e.g., Wiseman, 1970; Bittner, 1967; Robinson, 1973a, 1973b, 1976; Bigus, 1973; Collier and Somfay, 1974.

(6) There have also been some observational studies of the functioning of Alcoholics Anonymous groups (e.g. Groves, 1972; Rudy, 1976; Taylor, 1977; Thune, 1977).

A general drift can be seen in all these literatures towards a greater self-consciousness about methods and more formalized and often quantitative approaches. This drift reflects trends in ethnographic and observational studies generally: the old style of the general description laced with telling instances and organized into a coherent characterization has fallen under suspicion. It is now well recognized in anthropology that a given culture may appear totally different as interpreted by two different observers using traditional judgmental and literary methods. In the alcohol literature, formalization has proceeded in three main directions:

(a) studies which use a formal structure of statement of norms; e.g. Rubington, 1968. This strategy does not solve the problem of reproducibility of results, since the methodology by which the structure is elicited is not formalized.

(b) an emphasis on "ethnosemantics," with a formalized statement of the "cognitive maps" with which the culture organizes language around drinking or associated categories. See Spradley, 1970; Hage, 1972; Topper, 1976. This tradition has drawn on the strength of the methods of comparative linguistics and the relative determinability and fixity of language norms as a way of formalizing methods. The methodology of "ethno-semantic elicitation" is however often not spelled out.

(c) a new emphasis on counting of instances of behaviors, interactions, etc. In the alcohol literature, this is so far most notable for counts of drinks consumed in tavern studies, where earlier studies (Mass Observation, 1943; Sommer, 1965) have been joined by a spate of recent studies (Billings et al., 1976; Harford et al., 1976; Kessler and Gomberg, 1974; Cutler and Storm, 1975; Plant et al., 1977) all explicitly concerned with methodological issues and feasibility.

A few studies have counted other items: drunks walking past certain places (Mäkelä, 1974); instances of referral for treatment (Robinson, 1973a); drinkers in the taverns

on a given day (Lorenzo, 1953).^{*} There is plenty of room for innovation in this area. Only one observational study has yet used the interaction episode rather than the individual as a unit of analysis (Watson and Potter, 1962), although Warren Breed (personal communication) is currently using such a unit in analyzing observations of the use of alcohol in TV episodes. Bruun's pioneer use of sociometric data (Bruun, 1959b) has not been followed up in the observational alcohol literature, although Plant used in a drug study a sociometric method to determine membership in and boundaries of subcultures of users (Plant, 1975).

The new self-consciousness about methods has meant more sustained attempts to spell them out and formalize their operation. But these descriptions of method tend to be specific to the study, and often of doubtful relevance elsewhere. The following references contain substantial descriptions of methods -- besides the methodological drinking-count studies cited above: Bigus, 1973; Taylor, 1976; Mass Observation, 1943 (see preface of second edition); Topper, 1976; Wiseman, 1970; Wolcott, 1974; Cavan, 1966; Robinson, 1973a; Plant, 1975; Roebuck and Frese, 1976; Sommer, 1965; Bruun, 1959b.

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* This very interesting study combined survey data, an observational census of drinkers, and anecdotal observations. However, it should be treated with caution, as there is clear plagiarism of English Mass Observation study in the text of its anecdotal observations.

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In March 1933 the National WCTU announced: "No nation ever drank itself out of a depression; if women take to the beer habit they have only to look at some of the beer drinkers in the London slums to see what is ahead of them. Beer makes fat."

MEETINGS AND CALLS FOR PAPERS
(See also elsewhere in this issue.)

Fifth National Drug Abuse Conference, Seattle, Washington, 3-8 April, 1978. Registration \$85 to: NDAC '78, 200 Broadway, Seattle, Washington 98122. Abstracts were due November 15, 1977. "In addition to plenary sessions featuring speakers, there will be films, symposium presentations, practical demonstrations and special sessions. This year, greater emphasis will be placed on workshop formats."

Fourth International Conference on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Liverpool, England, 9-14 April, 1978. Correspondence to: Ms. M.C. Smith, B1 The Temple, Dale Street, Liverpool L2 5RU England. Abstracts were due 30 November 1977.

NCA 1978 National Alcoholism Forum, St. Louis, Missouri, 28 April - 3 May 1978. Abstracts due by January 20. Medical-Scientific papers should be submitted to: Ms. Susan Peck, NCA Medical Department, 733 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

32nd International Congress on Alcohol and Drug Dependence, Warsaw, Poland, 3-8 September 1978. Registration (330 Swiss Fr. before May 1) to: Polish Organizing Committee, Sobieskiego 1/9, 02-957 Warszawa, Poland. Abstracts of papers proposed for presentation were requested to be sent by August 1, 1977 to ICAA, Case Postale 140, 1001 Lausanne, Switzerland. The conference theme is: Societal Responsibility in the Reduction of Demand for Alcohol and Other Drugs; 28 working group topics are listed.

13th Annual Conference of the Canadian Addictions Foundation, Calgary, Alberta 24-29 September 1978. Correspondence: Stuart Hutton, Alberta Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Commission, 812 - 16th Avenue SW, Calgary, Alberta T2R 0T2, Canada. There will be an emphasis on "the concepts of Health Promotion as applicable to the addictions field." Five copies of an abstract of papers proposed for presentation should be sent by March 3 1978 to: L.M. Blumenthal, 5th Floor, 10050-112th St., Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1L9, Canada.