

## **A Note on Observational Studies of Drinking and Community Responses\***

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The concept of observational studies covers a wide variety of approaches and possible subject matter. We can observe objects, spatial relations, 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.

Many studies, even those characterized as “observational” studies, use a mixture of methods. The boundary between eliciting conversation by a participant observer and unstructured inquiries by an interviewer is faint.

Here we will mention only briefly observational studies of objects and spatial relations. 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). A few studies have mapped and discussed the spatial arrangements inside drinking establishments and their implications (e.g., Mass Observation 1943; Sommer 1969). A few studies have counted and mapped the detritus of drinking—beer cans, bottles, etc. Counting the litter in a given area is an inexpensive, unobtrusive way of monitoring changes in drinking patterns. One study in Arizona used archaeological methods to examine nutritional and drinking patterns as revealed in people’s garbage (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

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observational study showed quantitative differences in behavior in the two types of settings (Billings et al. 1976). The classic studies by Bruun (1959*a*; 1959*b*) 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.

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

The large tradition of anthropological studies of drinking in traditional cultures contains many observational studies. A lengthy bibliography of such studies has been compiled by Heath (1976). The typical study makes an overall characterization of drinking customs and institutions in the culture. 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 nonindustrial, nonurban segments of the culture—typically the small town (e.g., Stone 1962; Warriner 1958; Honigmann 1963). These latter studies draw both on anthropological traditions and on the lively tradition of the small-town study which flourished among American sociologists from the 1930s through the 1950s.

There is a large literature of observational studies in taverns and other public drinking places. See the following references: Calkins 1919; 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 toward characterizing the tavern as an institution and some toward 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 focused on drinking at festivals or at other special occasions (e.g., Ossenberg 1969).

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

Studies of drinking in private places are rare. The one substantial United States attempt reported substantial ethical and methodological difficulties with such a study (Riesman and Watson 1964).

There have been some observational studies of interactions in treatment and other social response agencies—e.g., Wiseman 1970;

Bittner 1967; Robinson 1973*a*, 1973*b*, 1976; Bigus 1973; Collier and Somfay 1974.

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

In terms of the two categories of observational studies contemplated for the World Health Organization community response studies, the literature is more developed and cumulative in regard to drinking in public places than in regard to processes in the institutions of community response to drinking.

A general drift can be seen in all these literatures toward 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:

- studies that 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.
- 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.
- 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 (Rob-

inson 1973a); drinkers in the taverns on a given day (Lorenzo 1953).<sup>1</sup> 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 television episodes. Bruun's pioneer use of sociometric data (1959b) has not been followed up in the observational alcohol literature, although Plant (1975) used a sociometric method in a drug study to determine membership in and boundaries of subcultures of users.

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 are often of doubtful relevance elsewhere. The following references contain substantial descriptions of methods—besides the methodological drinking-count studies cited above: Bigus 1973; Taylor 1977; 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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<sup>1</sup> This interesting study combined survey data, an observational census of drinkers, and anecdotal observations. However, it should be treated with caution because there is clear plagiarism of the English Mass Observation study in the text of its anecdotal observations.

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