

Review:

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**Noelie Rodríguez & Alan Ryave (2002). Systematic Self-Observation** (Series: Qualitative research methods series – Volume 49). London: Sage, 66 pages  
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**Abstract:** This book systematizes 13 years of work by the two authors who debate their achievements and the objections to their method, Systematic Self-Observation (SSO). They introduce SSO as a valid and reliable approach to the study of intra-psychic processes that accompany various experiences of everyday life (e.g. telling lies, passing rumors) which would otherwise go unnoted. The authors introduce a brief review of work concerning the self-observation technique, point out the differences between their method and other similar ones, and provide a detailed description of how to implement this technique in research. The book is supplemented by a series of research abstracts that allow the reader to view the kind of results that may be achieved, and a description of the application of SSO in other areas, including pedagogy and psychotherapy. It is a very interesting book for anybody who wants to explore new ways of understanding the thoughts and feelings that accompany our daily social behavior.

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### **1. Relevance of the Work**

This book presents the systematization of a 13 year-long experience that led to the development of a qualitative research method that the authors have called Systematic Self-Observation (SSO). This method seeks to contribute a new way of studying pre-conscious emotions and beliefs that arise in people as they take part in various social interactions in their everyday routines. [1]

*Systematic Self-Observation* clearly offers an invitation to debate and to discuss the progress achieved in the development of this technique. In five chapters it discusses its theoretical framework, how the methodology can be applied, practical cases for illustration purposes, and a critical evaluation of strengths and weaknesses that call for discussion and fine tuning of the processes. [2]

The work takes up a research technique employed by early psychological researchers. Wilhelm WUNDT, who is considered as one of the founding fathers of "scientific" psychology, conducted research in his Leipzig laboratory that

combined what was currently known as experimental psychology with introspection. The positivist tradition in psychology gradually rejected introspection as a scientific method. Thus, many texts remember WUNDT more for his experimental laboratory than for his interest in introspection and cultural analysis. [3]

With the concern, during the 1970s for studying micro-social processes and everyday life situations, observation and participative observation returned to the world of social analysis hand in hand with anthropology and symbolic interactionism, for which they were major research tools. Although self-observation was a part of social scientists' endeavors, it had not merited reflection and systematic application. [4]

In the prologue, Howard SCHWARTZ introduces Systematic Self-Observation as a technique that attempts to mediate between positivist approaches that separate the object from the subject who knows, and post-modern postures that view everything as speech in competition that almost dissolves reality. To SCHWARTZ thanks to SSO, subjective experience does not have to be subject to bias and error, but can be studied with valid and reliable observation. As SCHWARTZ states the authors have limited their work to the systematization of a methodology, SSO, that aims at a more rigorous approach to the study of the feelings and beliefs that accompany everyday interactions and then set about debating their achievements and difficulties. [5]

## **2. Introduction of the Technique and its Limits**

SSO lies within the areas of concern of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, among others, as it focuses on the qualitative study of everyday life situations. Thus, its major concern is to identify, describe and understand the existing social order in everyday life situations. The authors consider that their specific contribution is the systematic access to a dimension of personal experience that is not directly observable: e.g. cognitive processes and emotions that accompany the day to day interactions of social life. [6]

SSO, as the authors state, involves training a group of informants to observe and accurately record a specific issue of their everyday experience. All participants must be alert to the same phenomenon. Informants are asked not to alter their everyday behavior and to be attentive to the presence of the phenomenon to be recorded in order to take account of it as soon as it occurs. This must be done through the detailed description of "actions done and words said," without describing any tangential information, thoughts or emotions occurring during that moment. The recording of the experience should be carried out as many times as the phenomenon occurs in the estimated study period. [7]

The authors are especially interested in stressing that SSO is useful only for the study of certain kinds of social and psychological processes. The feeling or the experience to be studied must be particular, well defined, easily identifiable, short

in duration, and intermittent in occurrence. Experience shows that this is the only way to develop an appropriate method involving awareness, self-observation, and recording of experiences that ensure the reliability and validity of data. [8]

The authors state that this technique helps to eliminate biases in the recording of experience to the extent that it is the informants themselves who must describe their emotions, experiences, or thoughts, without the participation of the researcher. They compare this technique to conventional interviews in which the researcher takes notes on what the interviewees remember of their experience. In such cases, the bias comes from both the researcher and the informant's recalling of his/her experience. [9]

Chapter 1 provides a brief description of the technique and its theoretical and methodological principles. It also provides an interesting and useful review of the works that have dealt with the self-observation technique from the 1970s to the present (WIEDER & ZIMMERMAN, see PLUMMER, 1983; ELLIS, 1991, among others), which can be a good starting point for those who are interested in further study of this topic. Additionally, the authors point out differences between SSO and other observation techniques, thus allowing for a better understanding of their proposal. They review systematic sociological introspection (ELLIS, 1991), the diary-interview method (WIEDER & ZIMMERMAN, in PLUMMER, 1983) and interval, signal, and event-contingent recording (WHEELER & REIS, 1991) among others. In ELLIS' method, "the researcher and subject interview one another as equals who try to help one another relive and describe their recollection of emotional experiences. Both the researcher's and the informant's descriptions of their emotional experiences constitute the database" (p.7). In the diary-interview method, the informants were asked to record all the daily activities they engaged during the week. Subsequently, the researcher conducted an interview based on the diary trying to expand the data by filling in details and going beyond events to attitudes, beliefs and experiences. [10]

The SSO differs from ELLIS' method because in SSO the interaction between researcher and informant comes to an end before the data are gathered. SSO also differs from the diary-interview method because SSO is an intensely focused form of self-observation; it is interested in only a particular kind of event. Also, the amount of time between the natural occurrence of the activity to be observed and the write-up of the field notes is minimized in SSO. In contrast with the methods described by WHEELER and REIS (1991), based on questionnaires, the SSO has the informant write the narrative. It is an open-ended self-interview with few structure segments. As RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE point out: "In contrast to research methods that use a pre-formulated questionnaire that directs the informants' observations ... SSO generates data that are written in the informants' own words ..." (pp.9f). [11]

Chapter 2 describes in detail the technique and the entire implementation process. The material in this part of the book has the highest degree of applicability, since it provides a step by step description of everything there is to do if one intends to do research. It deals, for example, with criteria to consider for

the selection of the research topic and the recruitment and training of observers. The course of the text enables the reader to see that the appropriate application of the methodology goes through an accurate definition of the experience to observe, as well as through the appropriate selection and training of the observers. [12]

As the authors write: "Not all social and psychological activities or experiences are appropriate for Systematic Self-Observation ... SSO is more appropriate for the study of hidden or elusive domains, like the motives, memories, thought processes ... and/or emotions that accompany overt behaviors" (pp.10f). The informant must be able to accurately reconstruct his/her observations into field notes without interfering in the social event. It would be better if the researcher were to choose a concrete, specific topic. For example, the authors suggest that is better to study the occurrence of "admitting to someone that you are afraid of something" than "moments of social intimacy" (more abstract). Other recommendations include selection of a phenomenon that occurs intermittently, of short duration, and restricted to particular settings. RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE insist on this "to make the three tasks of recognizing, self-observing, and reporting the background details of everyday life more manageable-and thus more likely to yield reliable and valid qualitative data" (p.12). [13]

With informants you have to take care in recruiting them, motivating them, and training them. The training process involves teaching them how to observe and how to report self-observations. As the authors contend "the most important task of the researcher is to train the informants to become reliable and accurate observers and reporters" (p.16). The informants have "to go about their daily life as they normally do and in no way to act differently as a result of the assignment" (p.16). Informants are trained not to judge the phenomenon being self-observed. The field notes should describe the phenomenon as it was experienced, without moral judgment. [14]

Chapter 3 focuses on a critical evaluation of the method starting from the assumption that SSO must comply with the scientific standards of validity and reliability in order to prevent errors and biases in the data. The problems and possible solutions related to informant recruitment, in both the observation of the phenomenon under study and in its recording are further discussed. For example, during the training, the researcher use examples when he gives the informants research instructions. The authors observed that the type of examples could influence subsequent observations. To counteract this RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE used many and diverse examples to promote the perception of broader phenomena. In other cases, the discussion and examination of the data suggest that informants may be missing details of the phenomenon. The authors believe that self-observing skills can improve with practice and training, but this is difficult to control. Other problems include the errors and biases involved in recall and reconstruction of the data. RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE recognize that "little is known about the accuracy of reconstruction of thoughts and feelings ... the alterations occur in unknown ways" (p.26). The overall impact of these potential biases depends on the abilities of the informants. The authors consider that

limiting the analysis to the types of instances that the method is able to access can mitigate some biases. Finally, RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE write "a judicious researcher should take the SSO data for nothing more than what they are: observations that have been perceived, recalled, and written up by informants" (p.27). [15]

RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE also point out the strengths of the technique such as its non-intrusive nature, its reliability, its ability to prevent observers' biases and, perhaps, most important, their practical experience with SSO has enabled them to enhance their understanding of a series of phenomena they would have had difficulty comprehending using other technique. The rest of the book is devoted to describing the applicability of SSO by presenting abstracts of studies that deal with various scenarios of everyday life (lies, secrets, withholding of compliments and jealousy) and concludes by introducing the possibilities of SSO in other areas such as pedagogy, therapy and personal development. [16]

### **3. Evaluation**

The document is very useful to the extent that it shares a new methodology which is described in detail, with reviews of cases that provide evidence regarding the usefulness of the kind of information it provides. The book can be used as a guide for experimenting with the described method. Thus, it achieves the purposes of dissemination and fostering the debate around this technique. [17]

The main contribution of this methodology is a more orderly approach to the study of feelings that are present during every day life. As the authors state, the definition of a research object is an aspect that benefits the effectiveness of its methodology. In that sense, the effort to determine that the phenomenon to be observed must be very specific, of short duration, and so forth, helps to better define the limits of studies of every day life experiences, avoiding generalizations and working over clearly defined variables. [18]

What could be objected to is a rather naïve approach to the process of knowledge attainment. Much attention is given in the text to demonstrations that this technique prevents biases and errors caused by the researcher's observation or data recording. The authors suggest that as informants learn to describe their thoughts and feelings directly over time their data will be free from bias. RODRÍGUEZ and RYAVE often mention that informants usually report that self-observation did not affect their behavior. However, despite these statements, the authors themselves admit that they do not have a way to prove these and other statements regarding those events that the informants deem to have been objective or not having been subject to any influence. Elsewhere in the book, the authors maintain that only current feelings and experiences must be recorded, unlike further interpretations, and at the same time they admit there is no way to control this. [19]

In general, the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the technique attempted in the book is quite appropriate. What is seen from all this analysis is

that regardless of how careful one may be intermediation processes always occur between what you want to record and your actual recording of the experience. I believe it would be best to assume that such a distance between object and subject will always exist, even though the informant is identical to the subject. That is all we can do achieve the best recording possible, which, we can be certain, will always be more or less altered by various intermediation processes. [20]

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