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A personal, retrospective view of ecological validity

Aaron V Cicourel 

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Abstract

The notion of ecological validity has been an abiding topic either implicitly or explicitly

during my entire academic career. Ecological validity focuses on how we seek to convince others of the viability and authenticity of our claims and can be understood by our use of primary and secondary data sources such as official statistics, demographic distributions, sample surveys, structured interviews, open-ended or unstructured interviews, and recorded discourse during social interaction. Ecological validity, however, can only be approximated in the social and behavioral sciences. The key issue is the extent to which data are congruent with systematic time samples of events and activities within local institutional or organizational settings. For example, direct observation of and participation in the everyday activities or practices of human actors during their daily life experiences by the use of, when possible, audio or video recordings. Systematic behavioral sampling by biological (behavioral ecological) studies of nonhuman animals (Altmann 1974; Krebs and Davies 1997) can serve as a guide for social scientists. This paper selectively discusses three previous research projects that attempted to approximate ecological validity.

About the article

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