

Spot Observation: Advantages and Disadvantages for Household Time Use Research

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ABSTRACT: The spot observation method of estimating time use is described in this article. Procedures for using this method in developing countries, where household activities are relatively easily observed, are contrasted with procedures used in countries characterized by very private living units and highly separated employment, educational, and household settings. Characteristics of various methods for collecting time use data are compared so that researchers can evaluate the trade-offs they can expect from selecting a particular method. A case example of using the spot observation method in a study of women's household and agricultural activities in the Njoro Region of Kenya is presented.

KEY WORDS: comparison of research methods, household activities, spot observation, time use studies.

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Introduction

Many of the empirical studies of time use have been motivated by a desire to better understand the internal functioning of households. Who does what activities? How much time is spent doing them? Who has leisure time and how much? How does time devoted to earning a living, to operating a household, to rearing children, differ among households in different countries? Are there intertemporal changes in household time use? Other studies have been conducted for the purpose of attributing a monetary value to work excluded from conventional labor force assessments. What is a "housewife" (or "househusband") worth? What is the appropriate reservation wage for persons not in the paid labor force?

Increased interest in documenting the activities of women in developing countries so that they can become beneficiaries of economic development has led to other studies of time use. The most prevalent method of collecting data on household time use in developed countries has been the time diary. In regions of the world where literacy is low, however, a method of data collection that requires subjects to complete forms or diaries is not appropriate. The timing of daily activities and the patterns of distribution of time among activities indicate that people decide how best to use their resources; therefore, studies of household time use are relevant. Appropriate methods of data collection are needed in the twenty-first century to reach populations in both economically developed and underdeveloped countries.

This article discusses spot observation as a method for estimating allocation of household time and contrasts it with other data-collection methods. Procedures used in a study of women's and children's activities in the Njoro region of Kenya conducted in 1988, in which spot observation was the method of data collection, are described (Ayieko, 1989). The advantages and disadvantages of spot observation and the experience sampling method, which is used in urbanized developed countries, as strategies for studying household time use are presented.

Spot Observation

Spot observation is a form of "controlled naturalistic observation" (Munroe, Munroe, & Shimmin, 1984). This method involves a large number of systematic, randomly assigned observations of activities