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REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Rebalancing social & personality psychology methods: The case for naturalistic observation

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## Abstract

Though naturalistic observation methods are lauded for their utility, they are often neglected in social and personality psychology research. This paper describes evidence of the absence of naturalistic observation methods in our field, and some historical roots of this methodological imbalance in social/personality (SP) psychology. The paper then provides an overview of existing naturalistic observation methods relevant to SP psychology, describes various types of barriers to conducting such research, and concludes with recommendations for overcoming these barriers to produce a more well-rounded science. It is time to rebalance SP psychological methods by valuing and investing in naturalistic observation research.

**KEYWORDS**
ambulatory assessment, electronically activated recorder (EAR), GPS, Internet research, LENA, online social networks (OSN), wearable cameras

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

> "Most social acts have to be understood in their setting, and lose meaning if isolated" (Asch, 1952/1987, p. 61; as cited in Rozin, 2001).

Social and personality (SP) psychological research has largely skipped foundational, descriptive work necessary for building a mature science ready for the rigor of controlled laboratory experiments (Asch, 1952/1987; Rozin, 2001). This has resulted in a science that is often not ready to be applied to the world's most pressing problems (IJzerman et al., 2020). More use of naturalistic observation methods is one solution to this long-standing problem in SP psychology.

Naturalistic observation methods are those that observe individual and social behaviors in natural, uncontrived environments (Johnson & Bolstad, 1972; Mehl, 2009). By underutilizing naturalistic observational research, we miss

  

out on the discovery of SP psychological phenomena that could lead to the development of new, applicable theories or the refinement of existing ones. This paper describes evidence of the absence of naturalistic observation methods in our field, and some historical roots of this methodological imbalance in SP psychology. The paper then provides an overview of existing naturalistic observation methods relevant to SP psychology, describes various types of barriers to conducting such research, and concludes with recommendations for overcoming these barriers to produce a more well-rounded science.

## 2 | PREVALENCE OF NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION IN SOCIAL AND PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY

Though naturalistic observation methods are lauded for their utility, they are often neglected in SP psychological research. Psychologists have pointed to the dearth of actual behavioral measures in the science of human behavior across several decades (Baumeister et al., 2007; Block, 1989; Mehl, 2017; Rozin, 2001). In fact, Rozin (2001) examined features of the Methods sections in one volume of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)*, which was and still is one of the premier journals in the field. He found that across 44 articles, only three contained any interview or observational methods.

The second author of the present paper conducted a similar analysis, to replicate and extend Rozin's (2001) work, and to learn whether this "methodological narrowness" is still present today. To do this, she coded all articles in the latest complete volume of *JPSP* (Table 1). She used most of the same categories as Rozin, and added a few relevant methodological distinctions (e.g., distinguished in-lab from naturalistic observation). Out of 52 journal articles, two used in-lab observation and two used naturalistic observation, the latter of which observed naturally-occurring *online* behaviors via social networks sites, rather than behavior in the physical world. The percentage of articles containing these methods did not improve, and the predominant methods reported were still overwhelmingly self-reports and experiments. Rozin's (2001) conclusion was that psychology is not yet a

> "well-developed science, in which basic, real-world phenomena have been identified, important variances in these phenomena have been documented, and appropriate model systems that capture the essence of these phenomena have been developed. These requirements are not met for most of the phenomena under study in social psychology" (p. 2).

**TABLE 1** Features of articles in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, volume 122, 2022.

| | Attitudes and social cognition | | Interpersonal relations & group processes | | Personality processes & individual differences | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Feature** | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** |
| Number of papers | 14 | | 20 | | 18 | |
| Explicit hypothesis or model | 11 | 78.6% | 18 | 90.0% | 10 | 55.6% |
| ANOVA | 8 | 57.1% | 10 | 50.0% | 1 | 5.6% |
| In lab observations | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 10.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Interviews/Narratives | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 5.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Naturalistic observation | 2 | 14.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Inferential statistics | 14 | 100.0% | 20 | 100.0% | 18 | 100.0% |
| Multiple studies | 11 | 78.6% | 19 | 95.0% | 10 | 55.6% |
| Self-reports | 7 | 50.0% | 17 | 85.0% | 16 | 88.9% |
| Experiment | 9 | 64.3% | 15 | 75.0% | 2 | 11.1% |

*Note*: This table is based on Rozin's (2001) table, and reflects an update and extension of that work for 2022.
Abbreviations: ANOVA, Analysis of variance; Interviews/Narratives, Semi-structured interviews and/or narrative methods.

It appears that this still applies today. Thus, SP research would make significant progress if it would use naturalistic observation more often to build the critical foundation of an ecologically-valid, well-developed science.

## 3 | SOME HISTORICAL ROOTS OF METHODOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

There is a historical imbalance, rooted in racist structures and practices, for what limited types of research qualify as high-quality science (McGee, 2020). Evidence for racial inequality in psychology comes in many forms, including relatively few participants of color and limited publication of papers on race in top tier psychology journals (Roberts et al., 2020). The consequence of this fact, relevant to the call for more naturalistic observation, is that decontextualized approaches (e.g., self-reports, in-lab experiments) have become the dominant norm. This cultural practice in our science has delegitimized "experiential knowledge" and resulted in psychological scientists studying behavior from the researcher's perspective, which often lacks richness and context (Lewis, 2021). "We have come to assume that our measures are objective and universal and sometimes forget that we are asking questions of people with particular histories and experiences that shape their understanding of what we are asking them." (Lewis, 2021, p. 1326). Self-report measures and experimental manipulations developed in this tradition are more prone to such critical errors than are naturalistic observation methods because they need not (and usually do not) study participants in their natural contexts.

Naturalistic observation methods are also prone to biases, as the data (often audio and/or visual data) need to be coded and processed, all of which occurs through a researcher's lens. However, naturalistic data do allow for different lenses to be applied. First, data are typically coded by multiple undergraduate research assistants. This brings more diverse perspectives to the data than faculty-derived self-report measures because undergraduates are 2–4 times more likely to be from more ethnically-diverse backgrounds than faculty (Davis & Fry, 2019). Second, later ideas that were not preconceived by the researchers at the study outset can be explored, including insights from research assistants. Such discovery-oriented work is a far less constrained approach to research, compared to the predominant methods in the field, often making it a more diverse and inclusive science.

The exclusionary foundations of psychological science became increasingly apparent in light of the replication crisis in psychology, as foundational psychological studies failed to replicate—often due to failure to prioritize external validity. To address this crisis, many open science reforms have been implemented (e.g., study preregistration, publicly available data repositories) to promote rigorous confirmatory research, and as an unintended consequence, nonconfirmatory research has further become a second-class citizen (Sassenberg & Ditrich, 2019; Scheel et al., 2021). While the open science movement has importantly remedied many problems with replicability and a crisis of confidence in psychological science, it has exacerbated others. Though failure to replicate is often a problem of external validity (rather than research misconduct), the solution to the replication crisis further pushed our field away from the types of methods that can enhance external validity by increasing ecological validity, including naturalistic observation. In publishing empirical psychological science, there is a near-universal, often unwritten, requirement of large sample sizes (Sassenberg & Ditrich, 2019). An analysis of four top SP psychology journals across a decade revealed that this requirement seems to have resulted in decreased use of methods using intensive, longitudinal data collection, like naturalistic observation, because of the difficulty collecting large sample sizes (Sassenberg & Ditrich, 2019). Importantly, small sample sizes in intensive, longitudinal studies limit generalizability, but can achieve sufficient statistical power through larger numbers of observations per participant (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). Despite this limitation of naturalistic observation studies, they bring ecological validity to SP psychology in ways that other methods cannot—a tradeoff that appears overlooked in review processes.

## 4 | NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION METHODS IN SP PSYCHOLOGY

Though they are rarely used in our science, there is a wealth of naturalistic observation methods that can be readily used in SP psychological science. This section reviews existing research that is relevant to SP psychology, though

the work notably often comes from other areas of psychology, like health psychology and developmental psychology. Our intention is to review the relevant types of methods, highlighting notable naturalistic observation methods and studies that use audio, visual, in-person, and online modes of observing naturally-occurring behavior and social settings.

## 5 | AUDIO SAMPLING

Audio sampling methods have enabled discovery-oriented research on social environments and social behavior. Two of the major audio sampling methods used in SP psychological research are the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR) and Language Environment Analysis (LENA).

**The EAR**. The EAR is an app on a device that records snippets of ambient sound in the wearer's environment (Mehl, 2017; Mehl et al., 2001). It is useful for assessing audible, real-world, unprompted psychological constructs, language, and behaviors in diverse settings. The EAR is an app that can be installed on a smart device (currently Android phones) and then the device is worn in a protective case—typically on the waistband (Robbins et al., 2016). Recordings sampled from participants' daily lives enable researchers to observe aspects of participants' social environments and behaviors without participants' awareness of exactly when they are being recorded. For example, researchers have typically manually coded interaction partner type (e.g., romantic partner, acquaintance), general location (e.g., home, in public), activity (e.g., socializing, watching TV), audible expressions of mood (e.g., laughing, sighing), and aspects of conversations (e.g., substantive vs. superficial conversation; Mehl, 2017).

Coding systems can be developed and adapted to address a particular study's research questions. For example, EAR research has examined who gossips and how in daily life (Robbins & Karan, 2020), the cross-context consistency of student conversations (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003), cross-cultural comparisons of sociability (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2009), cancer- and non-cancer-related conversations among couples coping with breast cancer (Robbins et al., 2014, 2018), athlete-parent-coach interactions (Herbison et al., 2021), and the link between interpersonal conflict and asthma symptoms among children (Tobin et al., 2015). Kaplan et al. (2020) provide a thorough review of the challenges with and best practices for processing EAR data.

After research assistants transcribe utterances from the sound files, EAR analyses can also incorporate text analysis programs – such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Boyd et al., 2022), or Thematic Analysis Software (e.g., DiscoverText, or Dovetail) to analyze large amounts of language-based data that would otherwise be time-consuming to code. For example, one study using the EAR and LIWC revealed that couples' focus on the spouse in non-cancer conversations (e.g., patient "you" and spouse "me") predicted better couple adjustment while coping with breast cancer (Karan et al., 2017).

**LENA**. Similar to the EAR, LENA is a wearable device that records audible information occurring in one's immediate environment. This technology is primarily used in developmental research to study early talk and vocalizations (e.g., frequency of engagement in babbling or cooing) in babies (Wang et al., 2020). The LENA device is embedded in a vest worn by child participants. A detailed description of the LENA system is provided in the LENA Pro brochure (LENA.org). The goal of LENA research is to gather continuous, naturalistic samples of language, and is primarily used by researchers to study language acquisition (Ganek & Eriks-Brophy, 2018), and some aspects of the interactions can be processed automatically (e.g., child vs. adult speech; Casillas & Cristia, 2019).

LENA has important applications for SP research. As with research using the EAR, LENA can capture large quantities of data on naturalistic social interactions and language use. This method can circumvent the limitations imposed by human coding of some categories (Casillas & Cristia, 2019), which are generally labor intensive, time consuming, and costly. Researchers have used LENA to assess links between socioeconomic status, home language environment, and children's subsequent language skills (Ma et al., 2021), associations between parent speech style and child social interaction patterns (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2017), and a method for investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parent-child interactions, child language development and social communication (Byrne et al., 2021).

### 5.1 | Audiovisual and visual sampling

Audiovisual sampling can be technologically-advanced, utilizing new developments in wearable cameras or capitalizing on publicly-available webcam data, or it can keep it "simple," observing people in public places using only researchers' own senses. In SP psychology, this work has yielded insights in a variety of behaviors that self-reports or in-lab observations cannot. For instance, when observing bowlers' reactions to their shots, researchers noticed that the bowlers waited until they turned around to face their friends before smiling, suggesting that smiling was not only a way to express joy but a form of social communication (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). Naturalistic visual observation methods have also shown promise in healthcare interactions (e.g., Scott et al., 2020; Todd et al., 2022). Video recordings of verbal and non-verbal communication between doctors and patients have revealed that patients more readily express their concerns to doctors who maintained more eye contact and came across as less dominant (Bensing et al., 2008).

**Wearable cameras**. Wearable cameras such as the Narrative Clip (Brown et al., 2017a) and the Microsoft SenseCam (Wilson, 2017), are small visual recording devices that take photos of the user's environment at preprogrammed time intervals and provide information about people's viewable environment and experiences. These devices function as a "visual diary," can be set to capture up to 3000 images from the user's perspective every 12 h (Doherty, Williamson, et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2013), and can be adjusted depending on a researcher's desired sampling rate. They can capture health-related behaviors (e.g., Doherty, Hodges, et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2016), health management (Maddison et al., 2019), physical activity levels (Hänggi et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2016), dietary intake (Cowburn et al., 2016; Gemming et al., 2013; Gemming & Ni Mhurchu, 2016), and can also be used to track physical locations, interaction partners, and daily activities (Maddison et al., 2019).

**Video-based methods**. While wearable cameras are useful for capturing "life as lived" (Brown et al., 2017b), this method only provides information from the *wearer's perspective*. It does not give researchers insight into many *participant* behaviors such as facial expressions, emotional reactions, and body language. In order to assess behaviors that are continuous and/or interactive, video-based sampling (visual or audiovisual) may be a better option. Devices such as home video cameras, video cameras placed in public settings (e.g., offices, hospitals), and publicly-available webcams can provide a wealth of information on the primary participant and their social interaction partner(s) (Campos et al., 2009).

Home observation systems (i.e., video recorders) can be placed in certain rooms or areas in or outside of a house, or turned on when certain activities are being performed. SP researchers can capture behaviors of interest during specific interactions (e.g., emotional expressions during a family dinner; Boyum & Parke, 1995) or during set periods of time (e.g., in bedrooms to capture responses to a child crying at night; Teti & Crosby, 2012). They have also video recorded couples' daily life on weekends (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013) to understand job stress and support processes (Wang & Repetti, 2016) and parental responses to children's emotions (Sperling & Repetti, 2018). Nelson and Allen (2018) review use of smart-home technology (e.g., devices with video, audio, and/or motion sensors) for in-home observation studies.

Publicly available webcams are video cameras posted in public locations (e.g., traffic cameras, live beach cameras, DMV waiting rooms and other government building cameras). They can be used to collect data on several human behaviors such as seating choices, groupings of people (e.g., couples, adults with children, racial/ethnic or gender composition of groups), activities (e.g., looking at phone, reading a newspaper, talking to another person), facial expressions (e.g., smiling, eye rolling), physical behaviors (e.g., changing sitting position, fidgeting, littering), and more (Bedford, 2011). Similarly, 'dash cam' footage and other smart vehicle visual technology can be used to explore demographic (e.g., cultural, gender) differences in driving behaviors (e.g., traffic safety tendencies, reactions to other drivers or accidents, altruism; Kim et al., 2020).

**In-person observation**. Although in-person observation may become obsolete with the development of technological tools for naturalistic observation, this method can be particularly useful in capturing social interactions and behaviors in public places. For example, in some jurisdictions, use of technology to record even publicly-observed

behavior introduces legal requirements to obtain prior consent (Robbins, 2017). Further, using technology can be costlier than simply taking notes on public behavior. In these cases, in-person observation may be preferable to using technology.

This form of observation generally involves having trained observers eavesdrop and collect data on public conversations or behaviors. Researchers have used in-person observation to assess the gossip behaviors of university students (Levin & Arluke, 1985), social contexts surrounding laughter (Provine, 1993), the association between social laughter and pain threshold in stage performers (Dunbar et al., 2012), and staff-patient interactions in a psychiatric ward (Rosenhaan, 1973). Personality psychologists have also observed "behavioral residue"—indicators of personality traits that manifest in clues in the physical environment—in people's bedrooms and offices (e.g., a cluttered room indicating less conscientiousness; Gosling et al., 2002).

### 5.2 | Emerging methods

There are many emerging methods that may become more commonly-used naturalistic observation tools for SP psychologists in the future. Here, three classes of such methods are discussed, with potential implications for SP psychology research. First, passive sensing, such as location tracking and GPS data can be used in behavioral, social, and health research (Ziepert et al., 2021). For example, data from sensors on participants' phones, including GPS and phone use, were linked to depressive symptoms in one study (Saeb et al., 2015). For a review of passive sensors in psychological science, see Harari et al. (2016).

Second, videoconference monitoring could provide information about social interactions in a now-prevalent format—virtual interactions (e.g., over Zoom or Skype). One study linked web camera usage to group cohesion in a class, which was moderated by gender (Bedenlier et al., 2021). Such data leverages technology for SP psychologists to learn about the ever-changing social landscape and individual differences arising from use of the technology itself.

Third, Online Social Networks (OSNs), which include websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat are a relatively new way for researchers to observe naturally-occurring behaviors, personality expressions, and social interactions. Rather than occurring in the physical world, these socially- and psychologically-relevant behaviors occur online. OSN data provides a wealth of opportunities for SP psychologists. For instance, it has been used to explore social media engagement of Twitter users after a natural disaster (Takahashi et al., 2015), pain disclosure while coping with fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis (Wright et al., 2020), and transmission of emotions, or emotional contagion, via OSN interactions (Kramer et al., 2014). Several studies have used OSN data in tandem with self-report methods to predict health, health behavior, and well-being outcomes from OSN user activity. For example, Reddit posts have been used to reliably predict users' loneliness levels (Mazuz & Yom-Tov, 2019), and model the likelihood of depressive and anxiety symptoms or suicidality (for a review, see Chancellor & De Choudhury, 2020).

## 6 | BENEFITS OF NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

This overview of SP naturalistic observation methods reveals that they provide an avenue for discovery-oriented research and context-relevant theory testing, which can develop a foundation for a more mature psychological science. By not relying on the researcher to contrive applicable situations in-lab or presume every relevant question, naturalistic observation methods add richness and context to psychological research, allowing participants to bring their histories and cultural and social contexts to the data. They also remedy some common methodological problems in psychological research.

Specifically, naturalistic observation methods can remedy problems with traditional methods used to cross-culturally study SP psychology. For example, exclusively using self-reports can introduce problems with reference group effects, where people in each culture rate their behavior or personality in comparison to their peers, obscuring

"true" cultural differences, as found in one study of sociability among Mexicans and Americans (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2009). Further, cultural values and biases can lead to differences in self-reporting constructs such as agreeableness. For example, naturalistic observation of behaviorally-expressed simpatía (e.g., expressing modesty, respect, friendliness) distinguished Latina from White European mothers' social lives (Rodríguez-Arauz et al., 2019).

Naturalistic observation methods can remedy other problems with exclusive reliance on self-reports, by providing complementary information. Multiple studies have shown very weak correlations between self-reports and behavioral observation of the same constructs (Heine et al., 2008; Vazire & Mehl, 2008), revealing that they provide very different information about a person and their behavior. SP psychology is currently far more saturated with information from the participant's perspective (Table 1), and using more naturalistic observation would balance this out with the observer's perspective.

## 7 | BARRIERS TO CONDUCTING NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

### 7.1 | Structural barriers

One of the main barriers to conducting naturalistic observation is its undervaluation. Because it takes longer to do, there is less opportunity to conduct multiple studies, which is the majority of what is published in *JPSP* (Table 1; Cialdini, 2009). It also faces harsher criticism in the peer review process, in the first author's experience (and in one reviewer's experience, who mentioned the added harshness of reviews of cross-cultural naturalistic observation work). When a method is novel, rather than "traditional," reviewers and editors scrutinize it in ways that other methods are not. Anecdotally, EAR research is often questioned for how coders can really know whether a participant is talking to a friend (vs. someone else), despite high inter-coder agreement, whereas self-report research is not questioned for how a participant can really know the answer to questions about how supportive their friend is. One manuscript by the first author was even criticized in peer-review for not measuring smiling in an EAR (audio sampling) study on laughter. All methods should be scrutinized for validity and reliability, yet some are subject to harsher criticism due to their scarcity in the field. Given the "publish or perish" pressures in academia, this is one area creating a lack of incentive to conduct naturalistic observation research (Cialdini, 2009).

Structural barriers—particularly regarding the pressure to publish—can be overcome when researchers invest in naturalistic observation research as one part of a diverse program of research. Such barriers are less problematic with multiple "irons in the fire." Naturalistic observation can be a researcher's long-term project, while also conducting faster-paced laboratory and survey studies. Including multiple sources of data will not only reduce the impact of the publish or perish norms in the field, but also enhance the quality of research questions and conclusions drawn about psychological phenomena under study. In other words, including naturalistic observation into one's program of research may cause a researcher to conduct some of their research more slowly, but the output will be worthwhile.

### 7.2 | Practical barriers

Naturalistic observation methods are often more expensive and time consuming than self-report methods. Purchasing equipment to audio or video record participants in their daily lives is generally more expensive than running a survey, for example, Participant compensation can also be more expensive than for self-reports due to an increase in the amount of time participants are being studied. While certain naturalistic methods may be relatively cheap in comparison to others, researchers may have to pay for the financial savings with time (e.g., simply watching people in public places vs. LENA or the EAR).

However, the most time-consuming portion of conducting naturalistic observation methods is typically processing and coding data, resulting in greater researcher burden. For example, Kaplan et al. (2020) outlined six steps of

processing and coding EAR data, which include coding development, coder training, coding and transcription, and data cleaning. These steps can all be time-consuming, especially in comparison to the steps needed to use self-report data. Coding and transcribing EAR data alone is estimated to take approximately three times the amount of the recorded time, based on the first author's experience. Thus, coding and processing the data is the most time-consuming part of naturalistic observation methods, and one that is not inherent in collection of the most commonly-used methods in SP psychology.

Naturalistic observation methods also can place a unique burden on participants: the knowledge of being observed can create discomfort (Mehl & Robbins, 2012). This discomfort can happen during in-lab observation studies as well; however, being observed in the lab may be more comfortable for some than being observed in every daily life setting. For researchers, this translates into more challenging recruitment than for a brief in-lab experiment or online survey. In an environment where academic success is so heavily weighted on rate of publication, the lengthy process of conducting and analyzing naturalistic observation methods is at face-value not as appealing as self-report methods and other more rapid lab methods. As Baumeister et al. (2007) so aptly pointed out, "journals do not seem to give extra points or consideration to studies that observe behavior instead of just getting ratings, so why bother?" (p. 399).

Practical barriers to naturalistic observation research can be diminished when the field values it at least as much as other methods, leading to the immediate consequence of journal editors and reviewers placing a higher value on this work, and a downstream consequence of increasing opportunities to fund this research. This could also result in search committees evaluating job applicants' curriculum vitae in light of the quality and diversity of methods employed. The results in Table 1 suggest that these goals require a critical mass of SP psychologists who conduct naturalistic observation studies, which has not yet happened.

### 7.3 | Legal and ethical barriers

Unlike many self-report or laboratory studies, conducting naturalistic observational studies—specifically, social environment sampling—involves specific legal issues about recording data from people's everyday lives (for a review, see Robbins, 2017). Laws on consent for recording audio and video data vary across U.S. states and countries. These laws typically started to regulate wiretapping, and many have evolved to regulate recording using smart devices. Some of these laws include an exception where there is not a reasonable expectation of privacy, such that one can record people as long as they cannot "reasonably" expect their behavior to be private. In some cases, passive consent can be obtained via the usage of visual warnings on the participant (e.g., a button stating that the conversation may be recorded; Manson & Robbins, 2017; Robbins, 2017), thus removing the expectation that behavior would remain private. This is a brief overview of some potential legal challenges with some naturalistic observation methods and should be carefully considered in the context of each study and its jurisdiction.

In addition, naturalistic observational methods involve unique ethical considerations regarding privacy and confidentiality. Methods like the EAR, for example, require privacy safeguards such as brief audio samples (~5%-10% of a participant's waking day), the ability for participants to review and delete as many sound files they desire, and implementing a blackout period overnight (Mehl, 2017; Robbins, 2017). However, longform audio recordings involve an important consideration of respecting participants, especially those from potentially vulnerable groups (for a review, see Cychosz et al., 2020). These considerations include potentially capturing information that could negatively impact marginalized individuals and groups by obtaining information that one would normally withhold on a self-report measure (e.g., different parenting practices, substance abuse). For OSN data and other types of naturalistic observation, ethical questions should be guided by questions surrounding people's expectations of privacy, including consideration of site use agreements; whether people expect their behavior to be permanent or ephemeral; risks introduced to participants; and whether and how researchers should obtain consent (Kraut et al., 2004; Robbins, 2017).

Legal barriers to using some naturalistic observation methods can be more challenging to overcome when living in a state or country where audio and/or visually recording others is prohibited. These laws have become more

restrictive as technology has enabled more recording; yet, they may need to become less restrictive as recording technology becomes so pervasive that it is accepted as a norm. For example, a majority of Americans own smart assistants and place them throughout their homes or carry them to continuously listen for the "Alexa," "Hey Google," or "Siri" commands ("NPR & Edison Research," 2022). When guests enter such homes, they may or may not notice these devices, making consent to be recorded in private places a much murkier concept than before these technologies were ever-present. Laws may eventually need to sync up with these realities.

## 8 | RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The barriers to conducting naturalistic observation research can seem insurmountable; however, the plethora of methods available ensure that at least one might be feasible and worthwhile for most programs of research. We recommend researchers carefully consider their research context, available time and funds, legal and ethical considerations, and importantly, the appropriateness of a naturalistic observation method for their particular study before getting started. Researchers should also consult one of the available overview papers for recommendations on how to get started with naturalistic observation methods (see the Naturalistic Observation Methods in Psychology section for references).

Naturalistic observation is not for every study, but it certainly is ideal for more than what is currently published in SP psychology journals. Psychological scientists should give it some room in their work, reviews, and editorships. Before studying a phenomenon, researchers should ask themselves what is known about it as it naturally occurs. If they come up short in answers to that question, they have likely found the place where naturalistic observation research is needed.

Research programs should take a full-cycle approach (IJzerman et al., 2020; Mortensen & Cialdini, 2010). This includes a healthy balance of inductive and deductive methods, the chaos and discovery within field studies, and the artificiality and careful control within experiments. SP research has failed to achieve ecological validity in our science (Table 1; Cialdini, 2009; Rozin, 2001). It is time to rebalance SP psychological science by valuing and investing in naturalistic observation research.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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