Methods of Sociologists: How Do We Know What We Know?

Understand research methods used by sociologists.
Understand value of all research methods.
Identify ethical issues in sociological research.
Why Sociological Methods Matter

- human beings exhibit inconsistent behavior
- subjectivity
- variety of methodologies are employed
- “nature vs. nurture”

- Sociology and the Scientific Method
  - requires the use of data
Why Sociological Methods Matter

- The Qualitative/Quantitative Divide
  - quantitative methods
    • statistical tools
    • numerical values
  - qualitative methods
    • understanding the texture of social life
    • less scientific
Doing Sociological Research

- Choosing an issue
- Defining the problem
- Reviewing the literature
- Developing a hypothesis
- Designing a project
- Collecting data
- Analyzing the data
- Reporting the findings
Doing Sociological Research

FIGURE 4.2 Research in the Social Sciences

- Choose an issue and define the problem
- Review the literature
- Develop a hypothesis
- Collect and analyze data
- Design a research project
- Report your findings

Peer review
Types of Sociological Research Methods

- Observational Methods
  - direct observation of
  - hypothesis tested against evidence

- **Experiments** (controlled)
  - experimental group
  - control group

- **Field studies** (social environment)
  - detached observation
  - participant observation
  - ethnography
Types of Sociological Research Methods

- Interview studies
  - purposive sample

- Analysis of Quantitative Data
  - Surveys
    - most commonly used methodology
    - Likert scale
    - types of samples
      - random
      - stratified
      - cluster
Types of Sociological Research Methods

– **Survey Questions**
  - coming up with good questions is hard
  - the wording itself can change the way people think
  - placement of questions

– **Secondary Analysis of Existing Data**
  - secondary analysis
  - reanalyzing data that has already been collected
  - different *forms* of data may be used
  - replication
Types of Sociological Research Methods

- Content Analysis
  - content analysis
  - intensive reading of “texts”
  - snippets from television shows

- Making the Right Comparisons
  - things studied must be comparable
## Types of Sociological Research Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Methods</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiments</strong></td>
<td>Some variables can be tightly controlled and monitored, but it’s difficult to control the independent variable. Replication is easy and convenient. Ethical considerations prevent many experiments with human subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field studies</strong></td>
<td>Sociologists can conduct research directly with the people they want to study. Researchers can often tease out both subtle patterns and structural forces that shape social realities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview studies</strong></td>
<td>A carefully selected sample makes it easy to identify common themes and highlight trends and behaviors within a very specific group. Generalizing about results is not reliable because the sample group is so targeted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surveys</strong></td>
<td>It is easy and convenient to collect large amounts of data about equally large numbers of people. Data may be corrupt due to poor methodology, including poorly worded questions and question ordering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary analysis of existing data</strong></td>
<td>It is often easier and cheaper to rely on information collected by others; sometimes it’s the only way to “replicate” a field study. You are completely dependent on the original sources and can’t use common follow-up methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content analysis</strong></td>
<td>A researcher can quantitatively analyze an existing text and make generalizable observations based on it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Small Group Activity: Research Methods Practice

- Pg. 142: Table 1
- Questions:
  - Why do teenagers smoke?
  - Are people today less racist than they were in the past?
  - Does income affect happiness?
- Explain how each question can be studied using the methods from Table 1.
Social Science and the Problem of the “Truth”

- Predictability and Probability
  - “social physics” (Comte)
  - answers from the analysis of variables
  - value: predict future behaviors
    - observer effect

- Causality
  - Quantitative: A causes B
  - Questions to consider
    1. Does variable B come after variable A?
    2. High correlation between A and B?
    3. Extraneous variables?
    4. Observer effect present?
Issues in Conducting Research

- Academic journals
  - *American Sociological Review*
  - *Social Problems*
  - *Social Forces*
  - *American Journal of Sociology*
- Peer review

- **Remain Objective and Avoid Bias**
  - **Types of Bias**
    - your own assumptions and values
    - embedded within the research design itself
Avoid Overstating Results

- Remain Objective and Avoid Bias
  - prejudice/assumptions contaminate results
  - bias
    - your own assumptions
    - the research design itself

- Avoid Overstating Results
  - saying a lot about a little
  - saying a little about a lot
  - relationships between variables
    - correlation
Avoid Overstating Results

- Maintain Professional Ethics
  - research should not hurt participants
  - CORIHS (Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects)

- Institutional Review Board
  - Informed consent
  - Continuous consent
  - Confidentiality
  - Anonymity
  - Deception
  - Harm
  - Protected groups
Social Science Methods in the Future: Emergent Methodologies

– “field experiments”
– new survey technology
– virtual online communities

1. According to Schwable, what is “relativity of perspective”? How might sociologists use it as a research tool?

2. Schwable spends a good deal of his article talking about sociological mindfulness. What would sociology be like without sociological mindfulness?