



Social Research Methods



2

Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 2, you will be able to

- differentiate between fact, theory, and hypothesis.
- distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research methods.
- discuss differences and commonalities between key qualitative methods.
- summarize key features of quantitative research.
- explain the importance of research ethics.

Chapter Summary

Research methodology is the system of methods a researcher uses to gather data about a particular research question. Early sociologists often emulated the methods of the natural sciences, which they applied without further modification to the study of the social world. Their approach to empirical research was often informed by **positivism**, which required researchers to remain objective and value neutral in their investigation of social phenomena.

Most methods employed by sociologists today can be described as being either *qualitative* or *quantitative*. Generally speaking, **qualitative research** methods are used to study social data that cannot be counted or measured and usually focuses on the social practices of individuals and small groups. This type of research is often concerned with the subjective meanings of people's experiences and their personal interpretations of the social world. Qualitative methods thus often incorporate an **insider perspective**, which privileges the voice of the research participants over that of the researcher.

Ethnographies, institutional ethnographies, case studies, and narratives are commonly-used methods within qualitative research. Qualitative research often encourages subjectivity and critical approaches explicitly recognize the importance of **social location**, including biases, of research participants and the researcher within the research.

Ethnographies study people and their culture and are typically carried out with the researcher spending time “in the field” with those being studied for an extended period of time in order to understand how people go about their daily lives and interpret the world around them. **Institutional ethnographies** recognize that there are at least two sets of “truths” operating within any given institution. One set of truths represents the **ruling interests** (e.g., those of the organization and its administrators) while the other set represents the **experiential** perspectives of those who work within the institution, tasked with upholding the ruling interests. There is often a **disjuncture** between these sets of truths or interests. Making this disjuncture visible can then bring about institutional change. **Case studies** typically involve the study of a single case or a few selected cases that exemplify a single social entity. Case studies are often used to identify **best practices**. Finally, **narratives** are literally the stories people tell about their own lives. While this type of research played only a minor role in sociology until the late 1980s, today it represents an important contribution to sociological knowledge. Narratives give people, especially marginalized people, a **voice**—the expression of a viewpoint that comes from occupying a specific **social location**.

Additional qualitative methods include content analysis, discourse analysis, and genealogy. **Content analysis** involves systematically identifying and then interpreting the themes that become visible in **cultural artifacts**, such as newspaper articles, advertisements, artwork, clothing, children’s books, and institutional records. **Discourse analysis** is carried out in one of two ways: either as an analysis of “texts” such as court transcripts or news stories, or as a broader analysis of large “fields” of presentation of information or concepts over a period of time, such as an analysis of the changes in the discourse of masculinity over the past hundred years. **Genealogy** is a type of discourse analysis that examines the history of the broad fields of discourses discussed above. An example of genealogical research is Edward Said’s study of **Orientalism**, which refers to the Western fascination with or romanticization of the “exotic” culture of Middle and Far Eastern societies.

Quantitative research methods, in contrast to qualitative methods, are used to gather countable data on social issues; they are more likely than qualitative methods to favour an **outsider perspective** and objectivity. Here, the researcher rather than research participants are the experts. **Quantitative research** focuses on social elements that can be counted and measured and is used to generate statistics. **Statistics**, in sociology, is the science of using numbers to map social behaviour and beliefs. Quantifiable research involves the use of **operational definitions**. Operationalizing a definition entails taking an abstract or theoretical concept (e.g., “poverty,” “abuse”) and transforming it into a concrete and measurable entity.

Two key terms used in understanding and carrying out quantitative research are *variable* and *correlation*. **Variables** are concepts with measurable traits or characteristics that can vary or change from one person, group, culture, or time to another. We distinguish between two different types of variables: independent and dependent variables. **Independent variables** have some influence on other variables; in other words they cause changes in another variable. **Dependent variables** are those that are assumed to be influenced by independent variables; in other words they are the effect the independent variable has.

Correlations occur when two variables are associated more frequently with one another than could reasonably be expected by chance. **Direct** (or **positive**) **correlations** exist when the independent and dependent variables increase or decrease together, while **inverse** (or **negative**) **correlations** occur when variables change in opposing directions. While correlations are relatively simple to demonstrate, it is crucial to understand that a correlation does not automatically mean that the independent variable *caused* a change in the dependent variable. **Causation** is not as simple to determine as correlation.

When someone assumes that a correlation demonstrates causation, spurious reasoning is present. **Spurious reasoning** involves falsely making causal explanations without recognizing the influence of a critical **third or spurious variable**—an outside factor influencing both correlated variables.

Statistics should always be approached with a critical mind. As sociologist Joel Best (2001) notes, it is important to recognize that all statistics are flawed to a certain extent, but that some flaws are more significant than others. Best emphasizes the importance of critical thinking when dealing with statistics and provides a number of questions to consider when statistics are encountered.

Finally, it is important to consider that nearly all research relationships are fundamentally unequal relationships. Typically, researchers have been the ones to define the questions, determine who will be asked what questions, interpret the collected data, and decide what will be done with the results of the research. This power imbalance is even greater when the subjects of study are members of marginalized groups and the researchers have more social power. Thus researchers now pay increasing attention to **research ethics**, which entails demonstrating respect for the research subjects. Today, all human subjects research must be based on **informed consent**, which means participants indicate their understanding and acceptance of research conditions.

Study Questions

1. What is positivism and how has it influenced sociological research of early sociologists?
2. Discuss the differences between insider and outsider perspectives in research, giving an example of each. Which perspective appeals more to you and why?
3. Discuss how different operational definitions of social phenomena, such as poverty, middle class, or abuse, can produce varying research outcomes.
4. Discuss the intricacies and challenges of operationalizing “poverty.” What are the consequences for different types of operational definitions of poverty? How would you choose to operationalize the concept?
5. What was the “narrative’s moment” described by D.R. Maines in 1993? Outline two of the ten propositions discussed by Maines that should form the foundation of a new narrative sociology.
6. Provide two examples of a correlation between two variables. In your example, identify the dependent and independent variables as well as the proposed direction of effect (hypothesis).
7. Explain what spurious reasoning is and provide two of the examples discussed in your textbook.

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. What is our country’s population? Are our unemployment rates increasing or decreasing? Which age group has the highest unemployment rate in Canada? These and numerous other questions about our society can be answered by taking a look at the Statistics Canada website

(www.statcan.gc.ca). In this database, you will find economic and social census data. Familiarize yourself with the statistics that are available to you. When you enter the site, you will have the option of locating specific data by subject. Summary tables, community profiles, maps, and many other important tools are at your disposal. Explore!

2. Narratives are stories people tell about themselves, their situations, and the others around them. Interview someone. This person could be from inside or outside the classroom. Include questions in your interview about the person's social location (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, occupation). Consider how these factors may shape the individual's point of view.

Further Readings

Carter, G.L. (Ed.) (2010). *Empirical Approaches to Sociology: A Collection of Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

This edited volume focuses on the relationship between theory and method, using classical and contemporary examples. Included are sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Annette Lareau.

Denzin, N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) (2013). *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A comprehensive overview of the history and practice of qualitative research, including a thorough discussion of political and ethical dimensions of research.

Denzin, N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) (2013). *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This edited volume provides a comprehensive overview of methods of qualitative data generation and analysis. Readings discuss, for example ethnography, case study, and narratives.

Northey, M., L. Tepperman and P. Albanese (2015). *Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Research and Writing*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

This guide is a useful resource for any student of the social sciences. It covers a range of different topics, such as essay writing; the relationship between theory, research design and measurement; referencing; and ethical research.

Helpful Websites

Source of statistical information about Canadian society: Statistics Canada:

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/>

Statistics explained: <https://www.khanacademy.org/>

Detailed information about the Stanford Prison Experiment, including a discussion of experiments and ethical concerns: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>

A good, interesting example of an ethnography: https://www.nfb.ca/film/carts_of_darkness/