

Chapter 5: How Sociologists Do Research

Chapter Summary

Sociologists conduct research on almost every area of human behavior. The research conducted may be at the macro level, encompassing broad matters such as social structure, or at the micro level, which addresses individualistic and small group interaction. Sociological research is necessary for a variety of reasons. Research will confirm or deny the validity and extent of what is considered to be true simply because it “makes sense.” Whereas culture has a significant impact on what one believes to be true, there needs to be a more objective manner in which to discover truth. Research provides the method through which truth can be discovered. To discover this truth, scientific research is used.

Henslin identifies eight steps in the scientific research model. These are (1) selecting a topic, (2) defining the problem, (3) reviewing the literature, (4) formulating a hypothesis, (5) choosing a research method, (6) collecting the data, (7) analyzing the results, and (8) sharing the results. Other authors may identify more than or fewer than eight steps, but the basic model remains the same. Two key elements to research are validity and reliability. Validity addresses whether or not the research measures what it is intended to measure. Reliability is the extent to which research produces consistent or dependable results.

In conducting research, sociologists choose between six research methods: (1) survey, (2) participant observation, (3), secondary analysis, (4) documents, (5) unobtrusive measures, and (6) experiments. Sociologists choose their research method(s) based on four primary factors: resources, access to subjects, purpose of the research, and the researcher’s background.

There are a number of factors researchers must take into consideration beyond the research method chosen. Some of these are beyond the control of the researcher. It involves a change in the subject’s behavior because he or she knows they are being studied. Gender and race are also considerations that must be controlled by the researcher, especially when the sample being studied or the subject of the research is gender or race related. Gender and race can be significant confounding factors in sociological research, and sociologists need to take careful steps to prevent gender or race differences from biasing their findings.

Ethics are of fundamental concern to sociologists when it comes to doing research. Although sociologists are expected to follow ethical guidelines that require openness, honesty, truth, and the protection of research subjects, their studies can occasionally elicit great controversies. The Brajuha research created considerable controversy and legal complications over the protection of subjects. Laud Humphreys generated a national controversy by misleading subjects when conducting sensitive research about bisexual men’s personal lives. A national columnist referred to his research as the product of “sociological snoopers.” A court case loomed over his actions.

Although a vital part of sociology, research cannot stand alone any more than theory can stand alone. Research and theory need to work together in order to fully explore and understand human behavior. Theories need to be tested, which requires research. And research findings need to be explained, which requires theory. In short, research produces facts, and theory provides a context for those facts.

Chapter Outline

I. What is a Valid Sociological Topic?

- A. Sociologists research just about every area of human behavior at both the macro and micro levels.
- B. No human behavior is ineligible for research, whether it is routine or unusual, respectable or reprehensible.

II. Common Sense and the Need for Sociological Research

- A. Common sense cannot be relied on as a source of knowledge because it is often limited and based on limited information.
- B. To move beyond common sense and understand what is really going on, it is necessary to do sociological research.

III. A Research Model

- A. Selecting a topic is guided by sociological curiosity, interest in a particular topic, research funding from a governmental or private source, and pressing social issues.
- B. Defining the problem involves specifying what the researcher wants to learn about the topic.
- C. Reviewing the literature uncovers existing knowledge about the problem, helps narrow down the problem and learn what areas need to be researched, and provides ideas about what questions to ask.
- D. Formulating a hypothesis involves stating the expected relationship between variables, based on predictions from a theory. Hypotheses need operational definitions, or precise ways to measure the variables.
- E. Choosing a research method is influenced by the research topic and the questions that need to be answered.
- F. Collecting the data involves concerns over validity, the extent to which operational definitions measure what was intended, and reliability, the extent to which data produce consistent results. Inadequate operational definitions and sampling hurt reliability.
- G. Analyzing the results involves the use of either qualitative or quantitative techniques to analyze data. Computers have become powerful tools in data analysis because they reduce large amounts of data to basic patterns, take the drudgery out of analyzing data, allow the researcher to use a variety of statistical tests, and give the researcher more time to interpret the results.
- H. By writing up and publishing the results, the findings are available for replication. That is, others can repeat your study to see if they come up with similar findings.

IV. Research Methods

- A. Surveys involve collecting data by having people answer a series of questions.
 - 1. The first step is to determine a population (the target group to be studied) and select a sample (individuals from within the target population who are intended to represent the population to be studied). Random samples are those where everyone in the target population has the same chance of being included in the study. A stratified random sample is a sample of specific subgroups (e.g. freshmen, sophomores, juniors) of the target population (a college or university)

- in which everyone in the subgroup has an equal chance of being included in the study.
2. The respondents (people who respond to a survey) must be allowed to express their own ideas so that the findings will not be biased.
 3. The questionnaires can be administered either by asking respondents to complete the survey themselves (self-administered questionnaires) or by asking respondents the questions directly (interviews). The researcher must consider the effects that interviewers have on respondents that lead to biased answers (interviewer bias) and whether to make the questions structured (closed-ended questions in which the answers are provided) or unstructured (open-ended questions which people answer in their own words).
 4. It is important to establish rapport, or a feeling of trust between researchers and subjects.
- B. In participant observation, the researcher participates in a research setting while observing what happens in that setting.
1. Generalizability, which is the extent to which the findings from one group (or sample) can be generalized or applied to other groups (or populations), is a problem in participant observation studies.
 2. Results of participant observation studies can stimulate hypotheses and theories that can be tested in other settings, using other research methods.
- C. Secondary analysis, which is the analysis of data already collected by other researchers, is used when resources are limited and/or existing data may provide excellent sources of information. However, because the researcher did not directly carry out the research, he or she cannot be sure that the data were systematically gathered, accurately recorded, and biases avoided.
- D. Documents, or written sources, may be obtained from many sources, including books, newspapers, police reports, and records kept by various organizations.
- E. Experiments are especially useful in determining causal relationships.
1. Experiments involve independent (factors that cause a change in something) and dependent variables (factors that are changed).
 2. Experiments require an experimental group (subjects exposed to the independent variable) and a control group (subjects not exposed to the independent variable).
- F. Unobtrusive measures involve observing social behavior of people who do not know they are being studied.
- G. Deciding which method to use involves four primary factors.
1. The researcher must consider resources like time and available money.
 2. Access to subjects is important; the sample may be physically inaccessible to the researcher, thereby influencing the choice of methods.
 3. The researcher takes into consideration the purpose of the research, choosing the method that will be most suitable for obtaining answers to the questions posed.
 4. The researcher's background or training also influences the choice of methods. Those trained in use of quantitative research methods (emphasis is placed on precise measurement and the use of statistics and numbers) are likely to choose surveys, while those trained in use of qualitative research methods (emphasis is placed on describing and interpreting people's behavior) lean toward participant observation.

V. Controversy in Sociological Research

- A. Social research can be very controversial because it is private, political, etc. Often the findings of social research threaten those who have a stake in the matters being studied. Peter Rossi's study of the homeless population is an example of such controversy.

VI. Gender in Sociological Research

- A. Because gender can be a significant factor in social research, researchers take steps to prevent it from biasing their findings.
- B. Gender can also be an obstacle to doing research, particularly when the gender of the researcher is different from that of the research subjects and the topic under investigation is a sensitive one.
- C. There are also questions regarding the degree to which findings from a sample made up exclusively of one gender can be generalized to the other.

VII. Ethics in Sociological Research

- A. Ethics are of fundamental concern to sociologists when it comes to doing research.
- B. Ethical considerations include being open, honest, and truthful; not harming the subject in the course of conducting the research; protecting the anonymity of the research subjects; and not misrepresenting themselves to the research subjects.
- C. The Brajuha research demonstrates the lengths sociologists will go to in order to protect the anonymity of research subjects, while the Humphreys research illustrates questionable research ethics.

VIII. How Research and Theory Work Together

- A. Sociologists combine research and theory in different ways. Theory is used to interpret data (i.e. functionalism, symbolic interaction and conflict theory provide frameworks for interpreting research findings) and to generate research. Research helps to generate theory.
- B. Real life situations often force researchers to conduct research in ways that fall short of the ideal.

KEY TERMS

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

case study: an analysis of a single event, situation, or individual (134)

closed-ended questions: questions that are followed by a list of possible answers to be selected by the respondent (131)

control group: the subjects in an experiment who are not exposed to the independent variable (136)

dependent variable: a factor in an experiment that is changed by an independent variable (138)

documents: in its narrow sense, written sources that provide data; in its extended sense, archival material of any sort, including photographs, movies, CD's, DVD's, and so on (134)

experiment: the use of *control* and *experimental* groups and *dependent* and *independent variables* to test causation (136)

experimental group: the group of subjects exposed to the independent variable in a study (136)

generalizability: the extent to which the findings from one group (or sample) can be generalized or applied to other groups (or populations) (134)

hypothesis: a statement of how variables are expected to be related to one another, often according to predictions from a theory (127)

independent variable: a factor that causes a change in another variable, called the dependent variable (138)

interview: direct questioning of respondents (131)

interviewer bias: effects that interviewers have on respondents that lead to biased answers (131)

open-ended questions: questions that respondents answer in their own words (133)

operational definition: the way in which a researcher measures a variable (127)

participant observation (or fieldwork): research in which the researcher participates in a research setting while observing what is happening in that setting (133)

population: the target group to be studied (129)

qualitative research method: research in which the emphasis is placed on observing, describing and interpreting people's behavior (141)

quantitative research method: research in which the emphasis is placed on precise measurement, the use of statistics and numbers (141)

questionnaires: a list of questions to be asked of respondents (130)

random sample: a sample in which everyone in the target population has the same chance of being included in the study (130)

rapport: a feeling of trust between researchers and the people they are studying (133)

reliability: the extent to which research produces consistent or dependable results (127)

replication: the repetition of a study in order to test its findings (128)

research method (or research design): one of seven procedures that sociologists use to collect data: surveys, participant observation, case studies, secondary analysis, documents, experiments, and unobtrusive measures (127)

respondents: the people who respond to a survey, either in interviews or by self-administered questionnaires (130)

sample: the individuals intended to represent the population to be studied (130)

secondary analysis: the analysis of data that have been collected by other researchers (134)

self-administered questionnaires: questionnaires that respondents fill out (130)

stratified random sample: a sample from select subgroups of the target population in which everyone in these subgroups has an equal chance of being included in the research (130)

structured interviews: interviews that use closed-ended questions (131)

survey: the collection of data by having people answer a series of questions (128)

unobtrusive measures: the various ways of observing people so they do not know they are being studied (138)

unstructured interviews: interviews that use open-ended questions (133)

validity: the extent to which an operational definition measures what it was intended to measure (127)

variable: a factor thought to be significant for human behavior, which can vary (or change) from one case to another (127)

KEY PEOPLE

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Chloe Bird and Patricia Rieker: These sociologists caution against assuming that research findings that apply to one gender apply to the other. Because women's and men's lives differ significantly, doing research on only one half of humanity will lead to incomplete research. (140)

Mario Brajuha: During an investigation into a restaurant fire, officials subpoenaed notes taken by this sociologist in connection with his research on restaurant work. He was threatened with jail. (141)

Laud Humphreys: This sociologist carried out doctoral research on homosexual activity but ran into problems when he misrepresented himself to his research subjects. Although he earned his doctorate degree, he was fired from his position because of his questionable ethics. (141-142)

C. Wright Mills: Mills argued that research without theory is of little value, simply a collection of unrelated "facts," and theory that is unconnected to research is abstract and empty, unlikely to represent the way life really is. (142)

Peter Rossi: Rossi produced a controversial piece of research related to counting of the homeless, which revealed that the average number of homeless on any given night was far less than homeless advocates had been stating. (139-140)

Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla: These two sociologists interviewed convicted rapists in prison and found that rapists are not sick or overwhelmed by uncontrollable urges but rather men who have learned to view rape as appropriate in various circumstances. (140, 143-144)