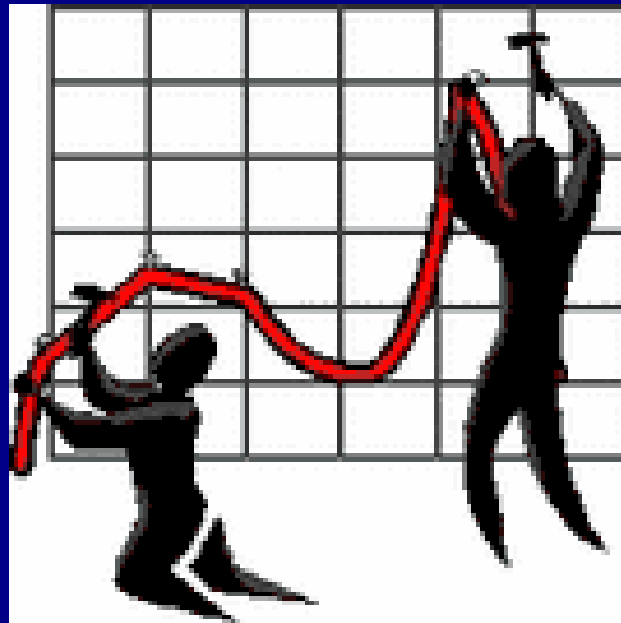


Research Methods



Family in the News

- Can you identify some main debates (controversies) for your topic?
- Do you think the authors' positions in these debates (i.e., their values) affect their presentation of the facts and their conclusions?
- What can you conclude about the "trustworthiness" of information about families as presented in the popular press?
- Are some press sources more "objective" than others?
- How do you think the coverage of family issues in the media affects our knowledge of families?

How do we know what we know?

- It is impossible to separate the knowledge about the families from how that knowledge was acquired
- We always have to be critical and ask:
 - How accurate is this information?
 - How was it acquired?
 - Do the data really mean what the researchers say they mean?
 - Is it possible that the researchers' values affect their presentation of the facts?

Everyday Research

- In some ways all of us are doing sociological research almost every day – we ask other people's opinions, draw conclusions, etc.
- Problems of such “everyday research”:
 - Based on our immediate surroundings
 - Not systematic
 - We use a lot of assumptions
 - We make conclusions even when there is not enough information
 - We tend to draw conclusions that protect our interests and beliefs

Errors of Reasoning

- 1. Overgeneralization: we observe a few people and conclude that what is true for these people, is true for all.
- 2. Selective Observation: we only observe those cases that support our opinions/beliefs.
- 3. Inaccurate Observation: we observe the things erroneously, not as they are.
- 4. Illogical Reasoning: we make illogical conclusions about causes and effects.
- 5. Resistance to Change: we are reluctant (due to personal interests, tradition, agreement with authority) to change our ideas in light of new information.

Errors of Reasoning: Examples

- Most teenage mothers are poor. Therefore teenage motherhood causes poverty.
- I know two couples that were cohabiting but then split up. So most cohabiting couples must be eventually breaking up.
- Everyone knows it is better when a mother stays home with her children. I visited the child care center once, and there was a child there that was really upset because her mom was leaving to go to work, which proves the common belief.

Social Scientific Research

- Social scientists:
 - Use systematic, careful, and controlled data collection process:
 - Design and choose questions in advance, and ask them in a consistent way of a large number of people
 - Methodically record observations
 - Use various techniques to ensure that the characteristics of people they study corresponds to the whole population
 - Carefully interpret the data and draw conclusions
 - When presenting results, they detail how they collected and analyzed the data it so that anyone could replicate their findings
- Social science is a set of logical (#4), systematic (#1, #2, #3), documented (#5) methods for investigating individuals, societies, and social processes.

Research Types

- Descriptive research – What? Where? When? How many?
- Exploratory research – What is going on here and what does it mean?
- Explanatory research – What causes Y?
- Evaluation research – Can we make X cause Y?

Research Methods

- Quantitative:
 - Surveys
 - Experiments
- Qualitative:
 - Intensive interviews
 - Focus groups
 - Participant or non-participant observation
- Unobtrusive:
 - Content analysis
 - Archival research
 - Secondary statistics
- “Mixed” methods

Experiments

- Dependent and independent variables: IV → DV
- Correlation vs causation problem
- Research Question: Do contraception classes help prevent teen pregnancy?
- Example: one randomly selected (or matched) group goes through a class on contraception (experimental group), the other does not (control group) – compare pregnancy outcomes in a year
- Advantages of experiments:
 - Can directly control all relevant variables
 - Help determine causality
- Disadvantages of experiments:
 - Rarely possible
 - Artificial conditions

Surveys

- Questionnaires
- Method of administration:
 - Mail
 - Electronic
 - Group-administered
 - Telephone
 - Face-to-face
- Many national and local surveys are available
- Cross-sectional vs longitudinal data – causation issue
- Questions to ask about a survey:
 - What were the questions?
 - What was the sample?

Asking Questions

- Open-ended vs closed-ended
- Avoid confusing phrasing:
 - Keep questions simple but clear
 - Don't ask two things in one question
 - Minimize problems with interpretation
- Minimize the risk of bias:
 - Avoid biased, loaded words or phrases
 - Make "balanced statements"
 - Present all response choices as socially approved
- Response categories:
 - Have balanced response choices
 - Make response categories exhaustive and mutually exclusive (exception – "check all that apply")
 - Make categories specific but within limits of memory
- Order of questions is important

Sampling

- Census = study the whole population
- Sample = study a subset of the population
- Are the sample results generalizable to the population?
- Representative sample = a sample that “looks like” population
- Probability sampling = random in statistical sense
- Nonprobability sampling = non-random (e.g., availability sampling, snowball sampling)
- Oversamples of underrepresented groups
- Response rate issue:
 - Case non-response – refused to participate
 - Item non-response – did not respond to some questions

In-depth Interviews

- Types of in-depth interviews:
 1. Unstandardized – no formal schedule of questions; only ideas
 2. Semistandardized – has a flexible schedule with questions and topic to cover, but probe beyond
- Advantages:
 - Open-ended, flexible, but controlled
 - Can probe the meanings of answers
 - Holistic – pays attention to the context, whole stories
- Disadvantages:
 - Difficult to prove one explanation over another
 - Interviewer may influence the answers
 - Non-random sampling → generalizability issues

Basic Rules of Interviewing

- Think about your appearance
- Interview in a comfortable place
- Be respectful, cordial and appreciative
- Never begin an interview "cold" – chat first
- Remember your purpose – obtain information
- Present a natural front – avoid reading questions
- Know your audience – ask appropriate questions
- Demonstrate active hearing
- Don't be satisfied with yes/no answers – probe
- Use a tape recorder and transcribe your interviews

Privacy and Research Ethics

- Conflict: privacy vs obtaining information
 - An intrusion into people's lives
 - Risk of disrupting -- private life stops being private
- Need to protect subjects and minimize harm and disruption
- Informed consent – people need to know what the study is about and agree to participate
- Confidentiality vs. anonymity
- Risk asking something sensitive or upsetting

Focus Groups

- Interview in small groups
- Moderator provides structure and direction but does not express opinions
- Advantages:
 - Conversation guided by specific questions
 - Dynamic, stimulate discussion and brainstorming
 - Can interview more people
 - Can observe subjects converse about the issue in their own language
 - Can observe interaction
- Disadvantages:
 - Less detailed information from each person
 - Not truly natural conversation and interaction
 - Group dynamics affect what is said

Observation

- Types based on observer role:
 - Complete observer
 - Participant observer
 - Covert participant observer (ethical issues)
- Difficult to be neutral – we bring our biases into the situation
- Difficult to use observation to study families

Unobtrusive Methods

- Content analysis of public documents: e.g., wills, diaries, magazine articles, kids books, movies, TV shows, etc.
- Can be qualitative or quantitative
- Especially important for studying the history of the family, but – class bias (e.g. diaries or wills – upper class)
- “Oral documents” – songs, legends
- Archival research
- Secondary statistics (different from secondary data analysis)

Social Research Philosophies

- Positivism:
 - Reality apart from our perceptions, follows general laws
 - It can be understood through observation
 - Value-free sociology
- Postpositivism:
 - Our understanding of empirical reality is limited by its complexity and by our biases
 - Values matter, we should try to be aware of them and keep them out
- Interpretivism (constructivism):
 - Social reality is socially constructed, does not exist apart from people's interpretations
 - Need to understand what meanings people give to reality
 - Our values always shape knowledge
 - Interpretivism often guides qualitative research, positivism and postpositivism --quantitative