

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

4 METHODS

SOCIOLOGY

Is a scientific discipline rooted in Positivism

As such it makes use of a number of scientific techniques...

Including: The experimental method, the survey and questionnaire and social statistics.



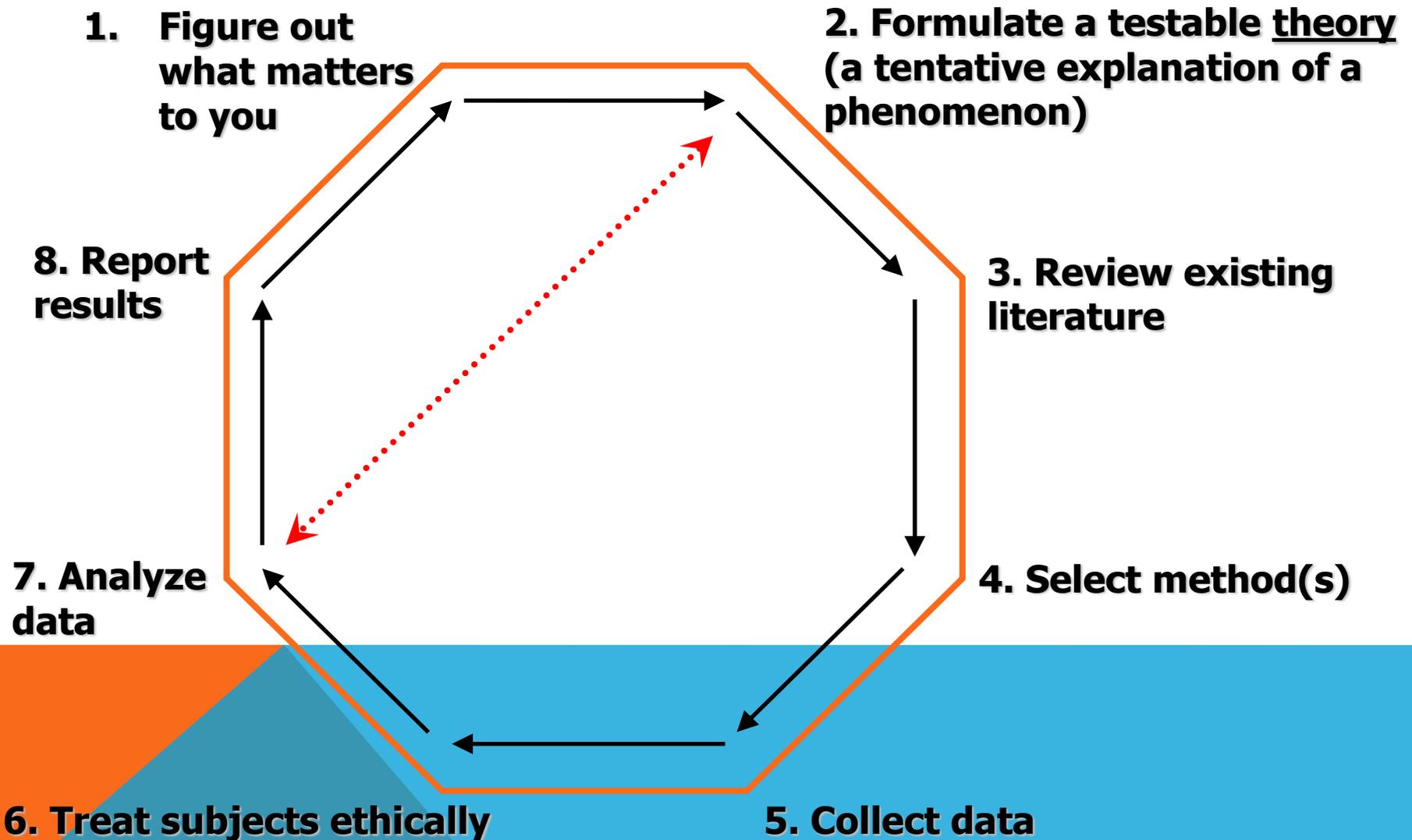
HOW RESEARCH FILTERS PERCEPTION



Values, Theories,
Existing Research,
Methods

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THE RESEARCH CYCLE



MAIN METHODS OF SOCIOLOGY

There are four main methods in sociological research:

- 1. Field methods (e.g., participant observation)**
- 2. Experiments**
- 3. Surveys**
- 4. Analysis of existing documents and official statistics**

1. FIELD METHODS

Field methods involve field research ⇒ Research based on observation of people in their natural settings

Strategies used in field research:

Detached observation ⇒ Classifying & counting behaviour of interest according to predetermined scheme

• **Settings investigated** by field researchers include:

- hospital intensive care units,
- white teenage heavy-metal gangs,
- the studio audience of a daytime TV talk show,
- the gay community,
- the alternative hard rock scene,
- ethnic slums,
- rave subculture

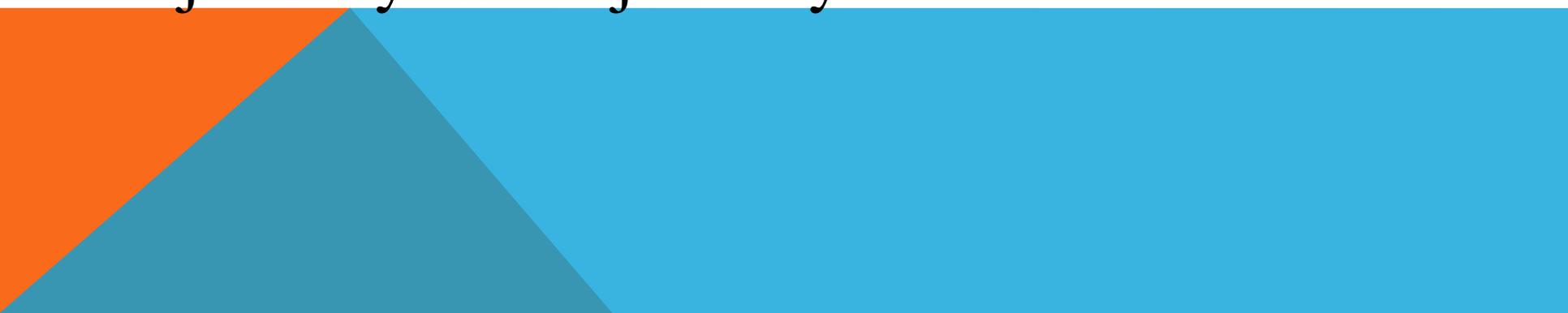
FIELD METHODS: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Involves observing people's face-to-face interactions

- participating in their lives over a long period of time

➤ **Purpose:** Achieve deep & sympathetic understanding of people's beliefs, values, and motives

⇒ **Advantage:** Allows researcher to maintain delicate balance between two extremes of subjectivity and objectivity



THE HAWTHORNE EFFECT

The Hawthorne effect refers to:

the presence of the researcher affecting the behaviour of the people observed, and was first documented by researchers at the Western Electric Company's

Hawthorne factory in the 1930s, who claimed to find that workers' productivity increased in the presence of researchers.

Productivity increased, they said, just because the researchers were paying attention to the workers



Ethnographic researchers have “gone native,”

- actually giving up their research role
- becoming members of the group they are studying; i.e Biker Gangs

GOING NATIVE

Going native is of no value to the sociological community because it does not result in the publication of new findings

i.e. **Black Like Me** John Howard Griffin first published in 1961

4 METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS **IN FIELD RESEARCH**

Reliability:

- Degree to which a measurement procedure yields consistent results

Validity:

- Degree to which a measure actually measures what it intends to measure



Generalizability:

- When research findings apply beyond specific case examined

Causality:

- Assessing cause-and-effect relations among variables



DEFINE EXPERIMENT:

a scientific test in which you perform a series of actions and carefully observe their effects in order to learn about something



IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF EXPERIMENTS:

Dependent variable: Presumed effect in cause-and-effect relationship

Independent variable: Presumed cause in cause-and-effect relationship

Experimental group: Group that is exposed to the independent variable

Control group: Group that is not exposed to the independent variable



- Experiments allow researchers to isolate the single cause of theoretical interest
 - measure its effect with high reliability, that is,
 - consistently from one experiment to the next.
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- Experiments allow researchers to isolate the single cause of theoretical interest and measure its effect with high reliability, that is, consistently from one experiment to the next.

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- Yet many sociologists argue that experiments are highly artificial situations; they believe that removing people from their natural social settings lowers the validity of experimental results, that is, the degree to which they measure what they are actually supposed to measure.



In an effort to overcome the validity problems noted above and still retain many of the benefits of experimental design, some sociologists have conducted experiments in natural settings



FIELD AND NATURAL EXPERIMENTS

In effort to increase research validity, researchers forgo strict randomization of subjects and instead compare groups that are already quite similar

Either introduce independent variable themselves (i.e., *field experiment*),

Or... Observe what happens when independent variable is introduced to one of the groups in normal course of social life (i.e., *natural experiment*)



SURVEYS

Ask people questions about their knowledge, attitudes, or behaviour in face-to-face/telephone interview, or in a paper-and-pencil format

Sample (part of group) surveyed is selected from sampling frame (list of all people in population of interest) to learn about population (whole group of interest)

3 TYPES OF SURVEYS

- I. Self-administered questionnaire (problem with low response rates and being unable to clarify - if needed - for participant)

2. Face-to-face interviews (problem of high cost)

3. Telephone interviews (increasingly popular due to relatively high response rates and being relatively inexpensive to administer)



FILTERING STAGES IN RESEARCH

Are four stages to filtering in sociological research:

1. Stage One: Researchers' *values* help them decide which problems are worth investigating
2. Stage Two: Values lead researchers to formulate and adopt favoured *theories* for interpreting and explaining those problems

3. Stage Three: Researchers' interpretations are influenced by *previous research*

 4. Stage Four: *Methods* used to gather data mould researchers' perceptions
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4. EXISTING DOCUMENTS & OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Three types of existing documents mined most widely are:

- diaries,
- newspapers,
- published historical works

•Existing documents and official statistics are created by people other than the researcher for purposes other than sociological research.



OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Most frequently used sources of official statistics include:

1. census data,
2. police crime reports,
3. records of key life events



APPENDIX: FOUR IMPORTANT STATISTICS

1. **The mean** (or arithmetic average)
2. **The median** (value of the case at midpoint after ordering data from the lowest to highest value)

3.. Correlation (reflects relationship among variables)

4. Rate (often expressed in percentages, and is used for comparing values of a variable among groups of different size)



ISSUES WITH STATISTICS

1. Are statistics a mode of deception?
 2. Do they simply prove what you want to prove?
 3. Since they are quantitative statistics seem to have authority.
 4. We tend to believe someone who cites statistics.
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There have been many concerns about the IQ test for example, and its racial bias.....à

Used to stream Blacks and Hispanic Americans into working class jobs



STATISTICS ARE VALUABLE

However, statistics will always be a useful tool to the sociologist, particularly if they are used correctly and supported by other kinds of data.

QUANTITATIVE Data- supports Qualitative..



STATISTICS:ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advantages: Inexpensive and convenient; rigorous and uniform methods used for compilation of official statistics; useful for historical analysis; controls for reactivity

- **Disadvantage:** concern that data may reflect biases of individuals and organizations that created them

SOCIAL STATISTICS-

Is a predominant part of North American sociology. As Brym demonstrates from his 1993 survey:

The Americans use statistics in 86% of the journal articles, Canadians 50% of the time, and the British only 6% of the time.

The statistical approach, and the scientific approach can probably be traced back to one major sociologist Talcot Parsons, **THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALIST**

SF-the dominant approach in the discipline through the 1950's and 1960s.



POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- a. Statistics emerge from sampling...random sample, stratified random sample, strategic sample

 - b. Statistical samples are only one way of illustrating sociological phenomena...usually used in combination with other techniques

 - c. Statistics can lie..(Huff, 1939) 4/5 dentists choose trident. How large was the sample?
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SUMMARY

THE FOUR MAIN SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS:

1. Field methods
2. Experiments
3. Surveys
4. Analysis of existing documents and official statistics

CONCLUSION

Both subjectivity and objectivity play important roles in science, including sociological research

Need to understand strengths and weaknesses of various research methods and control for weaknesses where possible

Overall, sociological research is useful for enhancing our understanding of social life