UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL WORLD

Research Methods for the 21st Century

RUSSELL K. SCHUTT

Do not post or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

CHAPTER 1

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Science, Society, and Social Research

Learning Objectives

- Describe the four common errors in everyday reasoning
- Define social science and identify its limitations
- Identify the four types of social research
- Explain the difference between the orientations in the following two pairs: quantitative/qualitative; positivist/constructivist

Online social networking services added a new dimension to the social world in the early years of the 21st century. Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook in 2004 as a service for college students like himself, but by August 2015, Facebook had grown to be a global service with 1.49 billion users—more than one of every six people in the world and four out of every five persons in the United States (Internet World Statistics 2012; Statista 2015; Statistic Brain 2013; U.S. Census Bureau 2013). When we talk about our social world, social media must be part of the conversation.

Do social media enhance social relations, or do they diminish our engagement with others? That's where social researchers begin, with questions about the social world and a desire to find answers to them. Keith N. Hampton, Lauren Sessions Goulet, Lee Rainie, and Kristen Purcell (2011) analyzed the responses received in a survey about social networks and Facebook and reported that 79% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 22 use the Internet and 59% use social networking services, but this usage complements their other social ties, rather than displacing them.

This chapter gives special attention to questions about Internet use, social networking services, and social ties, but its goal is to illustrate the value of social research and introduce the methods of social research in relation to a compelling contemporary issue. We cannot avoid asking questions about our complex social world, or our position in it. In fact, the more that you begin to "think like a social scientist," the more such questions will come to mind—and that's a good thing! But it is through learning how answers to questions about the social world can be improved with systematic methods of investigation that we can move beyond first impressions and gut reactions. The use of research methods to investigate questions about the social world results in knowledge that can be more important, more trustworthy, and more useful than reliance just on personal opinions and individual experiences. You will also learn about the challenges that researchers confront. By the chapter's end, you should know what is "scientific" in social science and appreciate how the methods of science can help us understand the problems of society.

Get the edge on your studies.
edge.sagepub.com/schuttusw

- Take a quiz to find out what you've learned.
- Review key terms with eFlashcards.
- Watch videos that enhance chapter content.

SAGE edge™

The Value of Social Research

As you begin this book, you might wonder whether learning about social research methods is worth the effort. It is if you would like to do as well as possible in your other social science courses; if you want to maximize your

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

career opportunities; and if you care about the community you live in, the schools your children may attend, and the direction of the nation. In courses ranging from the sociology of gender to the politics of communication, you will read about social research results and so need to know how to assess the quality of the evidence produced. Almost any organization for which you might work, from a government agency or a nonprofit organization to a private employer, conducts or at least uses social research methods to evaluate programs, identify client needs, or assess customer satisfaction. If you plan to work as a program director, social service worker, or in almost any other capacity, your ability to understand social research will help you to evaluate information and make decisions; of course, it is also a necessary foundation for graduate school. And there can be even more direct benefits if you take advantage of one of the many job opportunities in social science research at one of the hundreds of organizations that evaluate and help to advance social policy, such as the RAND Corporation, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the Institute for Social Research (ISR), Mathematica, and ABT Associates (Prewitt, Schwandt, & Straf 2012:28). As you will see in the "Careers and Research" vignettes throughout *Understanding the Social World*, there are many opportunities to enhance your job prospects if you understand social research methods.

©iStockphoto.com/adventtr

Photo 1.1 Researchers are taking a close look at the effect of social media on social relations. What effect do you think they have?

AUDIO LINK
Social Media

SAGE JOURNAL ARTICLE
Social Activity and Older Demographics

The U.S. federal government spent about $1.3 billion on social science research (including psychology and economics) in fiscal year 2011, and federal statistical agencies and programs had a total budget exceeding $6.5 billion in fiscal 2012 (Prewitt et al. 2012:31-32). In the United Kingdom, social science research expenditures from all sources at universities amounted to £851 million ($1.3 billion) in 2010–2011 (Bastow, Dunleavy, & Tinkler 2014:11). Social science research has identified influences on voting, variation in civic engagement, and the role of social factors in physical and mental health (AAU 2013). The results have included programs that have helped to increase voter turnout, reduce violence in communities, lessen smoking and hence rates of lung cancer, improve the health and well-being of infants, and lower rates of domestic violence. From wellness visits by teen mothers to community-based policing, social science research has helped to improve social welfare (Abrams 2007:2-4; NIH n.d.). By learning the methods used in this type of research, you can begin to evaluate its quality and help to shape its impact. Are you ready to proceed?

❖ Avoiding Errors in Reasoning About the Social World

How can we improve our reasoning about the social world? How do social research methods help us to avoid errors rooted in personal experiences? First, let's identify the different processes involved in learning about the social world and the types of errors that can result as we reason about the social world.

When we learn about the social world, we engage in one or more of four processes: (1) "*observing*" through our five senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, or smelling); (2) *generalizing* from what we have observed to other times, places, or people; (3) *reasoning* about the connections between different things that we have observed; and (4) *reevaluating* our understanding of the social world on the basis of these processes. It is easy to make mistakes with each of them.

My favorite example of the errors in reasoning that occur in the nonscientific, unreflective discourse about the social world that we hear on a daily basis comes from a letter to famous advice columnist Ann Landers. The letter was written by someone who had just moved with her two cats from the city to a house in the country. In the city, she had not let her cats outside and felt guilty about confining them. When they arrived in the country, she threw her back door open. Her two cats cautiously went to the door and looked outside for a while, then returned to the living room and lay down. Her conclusion was that people shouldn't feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors. Even when they have the chance, cats don't really want to play outside, she reasoned.

Do you see this person's errors in her approach to

- *Observing?* She observed the cats at the outside door only once.
- *Generalizing?* She observed only two cats, both of which previously were confined indoors.
- *Reasoning?* She assumed that others feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors and that cats are motivated by feelings about opportunities to play.
- *Reevaluating?* She was quick to conclude that she had no need to change her approach to the cats.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

©iStockphoto.com/w-ings

Photo 1.2 What could the woman with the cats have done to avoid the four errors in reasoning?

You don't have to be a scientist or use sophisticated research techniques to avoid these four errors in reasoning, but the methods of social science are designed to reduce greatly the risk of making them. **Science** relies on logical and systematic methods to answer questions. Science does this in a way that allows others to inspect and evaluate its methods. In this way, scientific research develops a body of knowledge that is continually refined, as beliefs are rejected or confirmed on the basis of testing empirical evidence. **Social science** relies on scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes. Although the activities involved in social science methods—asking questions, observing social groups, or counting people—are similar to things we do in our everyday lives, social scientists develop, refine, apply, and report their understanding of the social world more systematically, or "scientifically," than does Joanna Q. Public.

Observing

One common mistake in learning about the social world is **selective observation**—choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs. When we are inclined to criticize individuals or institutions, it is all too easy to notice their every failure. For example, if we are convinced in advance that all heavy Internet users are antisocial, we can find many confirming instances. But what about elderly people who serve as Internet pen pals for grade-school children? Couples who maintain their relationship when working in faraway cities? If we acknowledge only the instances that confirm our predispositions, we are victims of our own selective observation.

Our observations can also simply be inaccurate. If, after a quick glance around the computer lab, you think there are 14 students present, when there are actually 17, you have made an **inaccurate observation**. If you hear a speaker say that "for the oppressed, the flogging never really stops," when what she said was, "For the obsessed, the blogging never really stops" (Hafner 2004), you have made an inaccurate observation.

Such errors occur often in casual conversation and in everyday observation of the world around us. In fact, our perceptions do not provide a direct window onto the world around us, for what we think we have sensed is not necessarily what we have seen (or heard, smelled, felt, or tasted). Even when our senses are functioning fully, our minds have to interpret what we have sensed (Humphrey 1992). The optical illusion in Photo 1.3, which comes from a JCPenney billboard that could be seen as either a teakettle or a saluting Adolf Hitler, should help you realize that perceptions involve interpretations. Different observers may perceive the same situation differently because they interpret it differently (so JCPenney quickly took down the billboard after complaints).

ENCYCLOPEDIA LINK
Generalizability Theory

Social science methods can reduce the risk of selective or inaccurate observation by requiring that we measure and sample phenomena systematically. For example, what role did social media play in the popular uprisings in the Middle East that started after 2008? It's easy to make up a "story" based on some messages sent by participants, but did this really involve lots of people? A group of researchers from Social Flow, the Web Ecology Project, and Microsoft Research (Lotan et al. 2011) investigated this issue using social research methods. They sampled 168,663 tweets posted January 12–19, 2011, mentioning keywords related to Tunisia, and 230,270 tweets posted January 24–29, 2011, mentioning keywords related to Egypt. They then identified those tweets that were retweeted most often and the distinct Twitter users within these tweets. Exhibit 1.1 shows how one tweet was retweeted frequently and so contributed to the news of popular support for the Egyptian protests.

Science: A set of logical, systematic, documented methods for investigating nature and natural processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations.

Social science: The use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations.

Selective observation: Choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs.

Inaccurate observation: An observation based on faulty perceptions of empirical reality.

Overgeneralization: Concluding unjustifiably that what is true for some cases is true for all cases.

Generalizing

Overgeneralization occurs when we conclude that what we have observed or what we know to be true for some cases is true for all or most cases (Exhibit 1.2). We are always drawing conclusions about people and society from our own interactions, but sometimes we forget that our experiences are limited. The social world is, after all, a complex place. We can interact with just a small fraction of individuals in the social world, and we may do so in a limited span of time. Thanks to the Internet, social media, and the practice of "blogging," we can easily find many examples of overgeneralization in people's thoughts about the social world. Here's one posted by a frequent blogger who was called for jury duty (http://busblog.tonypierce.com/2005/06/yesterday-i-had-to-go-to-jury-duty-to.html, posted on June 17, 2005):

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

yesterday i had to go to jury duty to perform my civil duty. *unlike most people* i enjoy jury duty because i find the whole legal process fascinating, especially when its unfolding right in front of you and you get to help decide yay or nay.

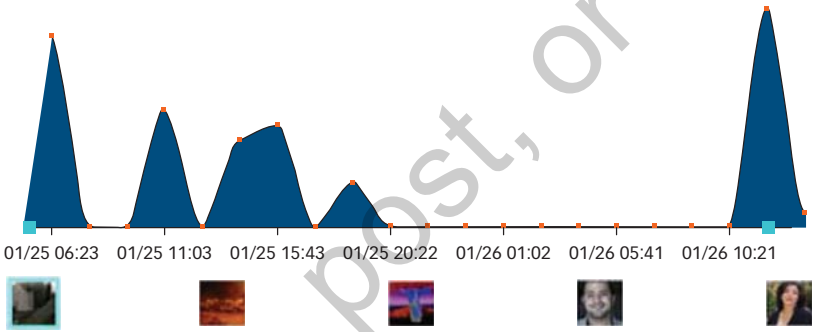
Do you know what the majority of people think about jury duty? According to a Harris Poll, 75% of Americans consider jury service to be a privilege (Grey 2005), so the blogger's generalization about "most people" is not correct. Do you ever find yourself making a quick overgeneralization like that?

Social science research methods can reduce the likelihood of overgeneralization by using systematic procedures to select individuals, groups, events, messages, and the like to study that are representative of the individuals, groups, events, messages, and the like to which we want to generalize. In the study of the role of social media in the Arab Spring events highlighted in Exhibit 1.1, the researchers

FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/Getty Images

Photo 1.3 An optical illusion: What do you see?

EXHIBIT 1.1 Retweets of Quote in Support of Egypt Protesters by Other Journalists Over Time

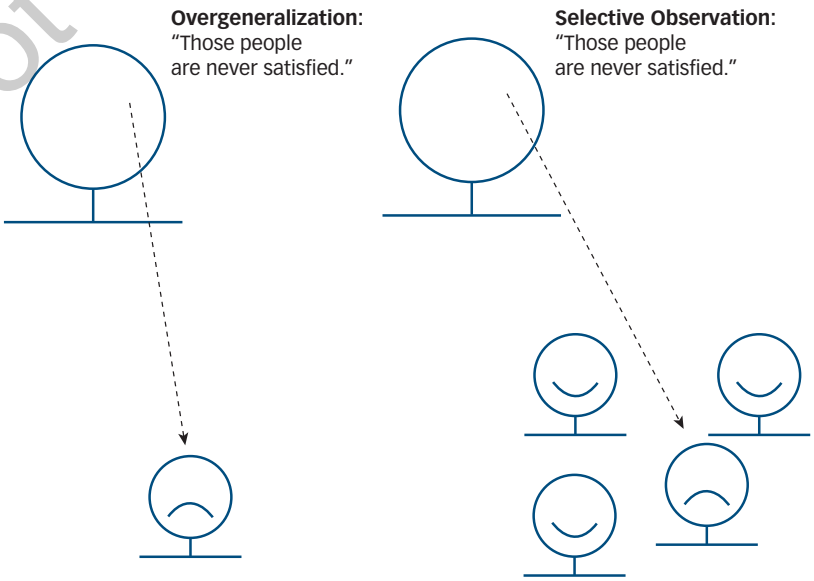


adamakary (Mainstream Media Employee)

Police guard in tahrir tells me, I'm just following orders, doing my job. Otherwise, I'd be with the protesters #jan25 #egypt

Source: Lotan et al. 2011:1394.

EXHIBIT 1.2 The Difference Between Selective Observation and Overgeneralization



Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

explain carefully how they selected tweets to study and why they chose to sample only from 10% of the most popular tweets; they also caution that this means their analysis does not represent all the types of tweets sent during this period.

Reasoning

When we jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions, we are using **illogical reasoning**. It is not always so easy to spot illogical reasoning. For example, more than 74% of American households now use the Internet (File & Ryan 2014). Would it be reasonable to propose that the 26% who don't participate in the "information revolution" avoid it simply because they don't want to participate? In fact, many low-income households lack the financial resources to buy a computer or pay for an Internet connection, and so they use the Internet much less frequently; that's probably not because they don't want to use it (Rainie & Horrigan 2005:63). Conversely, an unquestioned assumption that everyone wants to connect to the Internet may overlook some important considerations; for example, 17% of nonusers of the Internet said in 2002 that the Internet has made the world a worse place, so they may not use it because they don't like what they believe to be its effects (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003:78). Logic that seems impeccable to one person can seem twisted to another.

To avoid illogical reasoning, social researchers use explicit criteria for describing events and identifying causes and for determining whether these criteria are met in a particular instance.

Reevaluating

Resistance to change, the reluctance to reevaluate our ideas in light of new information, may occur for several reasons:

- *Ego-based and institutional commitments.* We all learn to greet with some skepticism the claims by leaders of companies, schools, agencies, and so on, that people in their organization are happy, that revenues are growing, and that services are being delivered in the best possible way. We know how tempting it is to make statements about the social world that conform to our own needs or the needs of our employers, rather than to the observable facts. It can also be difficult to admit that we were wrong, once we have staked out a position on an issue. Barry Wellman recounts a call from a reporter after the death of what he believed were four "cyber addicts" (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie 2006:1). The reporter just wanted a quote from a computer-use expert, such as Wellman, that would affirm his belief. But the interview didn't last long:

Illogical reasoning: Jumping to conclusions or arguing on the basis of invalid assumptions.

Resistance to change: The reluctance to reevaluate our ideas in light of new information.

> The reporter lost interest when Wellman pointed out that other causes might be involved, that "addicts" were a low percentage of users, and that no one worries about "neighboring addicts" who chat daily in their front yards. (Boase et al. 2006:1)

RESEARCH In the News

WHY DOESN'T THE INTERNET REACH EVERYONE?

In a recent survey, social psychologist Ethan Kross found that young people who spent more time on Facebook felt less good about their own lives. He concluded that the problem was that the rosy self-portraits they saw on Facebook made users feel deficient by comparison.

So when we investigate the social world, it's a good idea to inquire about our participants' online social worlds as well as their face-to-face contacts. We also can use postings to social media sites as another source of data about the social world.

For Further Thought

1. People have always tried to manage their images in the social world. Do social media allow us to take this impression management to a whole new level?
2. What are the consequences for our everyday lives?
3. What does this mean for the research methods we use to study the social world?

News source: Burge, Kathleen. 2014. "Overblown Facebook Personas Can Leave Friends Deflated." *Boston Globe*, September 30.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

- *Excessive devotion to tradition.* Some degree of devotion to tradition is necessary for the predictable functioning of society. Social life can be richer and more meaningful if it is allowed to flow along the paths charted by those who have preceded us. But too much devotion to tradition can stifle adaptation to and understanding of changing circumstances.

- *Uncritical agreement with authority.* If we do not have the courage to evaluate critically the ideas of those in positions of authority, we will have little basis for complaint if they exercise their authority over us in ways we don't like. And, if we do not allow new discoveries to challenge our beliefs, our understanding of the social world will remain limited. Do you see some of the challenges social science faces?

Because they require that we base our beliefs on evidence that can be examined and critiqued by others, scientific methods lessen the tendency to develop answers about the social world from ego-based or institutional commitments, excessive devotion to tradition, or unquestioning respect for authority. For example, when Alice Marwick and danah boyd investigated what adults usually refer to as "bullying" on social media, they found that teens themselves often instead used the term *drama* as a way of distancing themselves from the concept of bullying. According to the researchers, "'drama' connotes something immature, petty, and ridiculous," even though the communications themselves may be quite hurtful. Marwick and boyd did not accept without question either the adult concept of bullying or the teen concept of drama as the appropriate way to think about the gossip, jokes, and arguments on social media. Instead, they examined these communications critically and so were able "to recognize teens' own defenses against the realities of aggression, gossip, and bullying in networked publics" (Marwick & boyd 2011:23).

VIDEO LINK
Change Management

AUDIO LINK
The Internet

RESEARCH/SOCIAL IMPACT LINK
Social Research in Practice

VIDEO LINK
Social Science

❖ Types of Social Research

Whatever the motives, there are four types of social research projects. This section illustrates each type with examples from the large body of research about various aspects of social ties.

Descriptive research: Research in which social phenomena are defined and described.

Descriptive Research

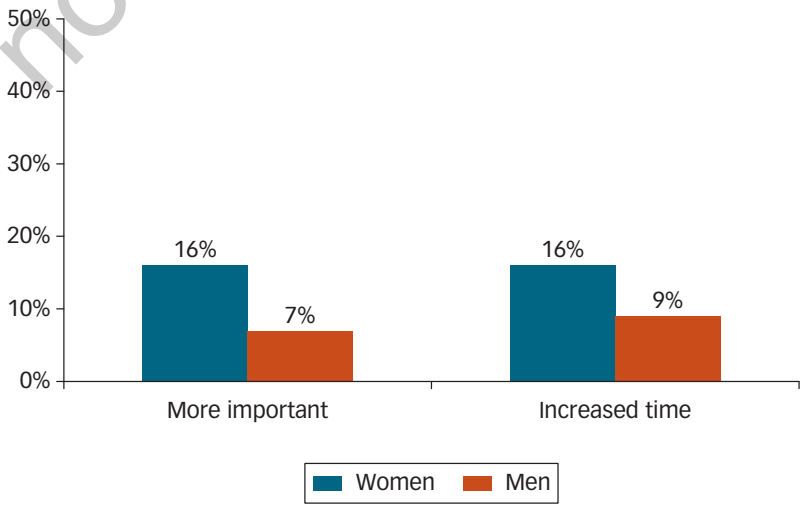
Defining and describing social phenomena of interest is a part of almost any research investigation, but **descriptive research** is often the primary focus of the first research about some issue. For example, Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears (2006) designed social research to answer the descriptive question: What is the level of particular types of social ties in America? Measurement (the topic of Chapter 4) and sampling (Chapter 5) are central concerns in descriptive research. Survey research (Chapter 7) is often used for descriptive purposes. Some unobtrusive research also has a descriptive purpose (Chapter 9).

JOURNAL LINK
Mobile Communities

RESEARCH/SOCIAL IMPACT LINK
Exploratory Research

■ EXHIBIT 1.3 **The Value of Facebook**

Percentage of Facebook users who say that in the past year Facebook has become more important to them and who say they are spending more time on Facebook compared with last year



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Omnibus Survey, conducted December 13 to 16, 2012, on landline and cell phones. *N* for male Facebook users = 233. *N* for female Facebook users = 292.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Example: Comings and goings on Facebook? Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet Project, and his colleagues Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan (2013) sought to describe the frequency with which Americans stopped using Facebook and the reasons they did so. To investigate this issue, they surveyed 1,006 American adults by phone and asked them such questions as "Do you ever use Facebook?" and "Have you ever voluntarily taken a break from using Facebook for a period of several weeks or more?"

They found that two thirds of American adults who use the Internet also use Facebook and that most (61%) say they have voluntarily taken a break from using Facebook at some time for at least several weeks (Rainie et al. 2013:2). They also asked about the importance of Facebook to users and found that the importance attached to Facebook by women had grown more in the previous year than it had for men (see Exhibit 1.3).

Exploratory Research

Exploratory research seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn "What is going on here?" and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. Exploratory research frequently involves qualitative methods, which are the focus of Chapters 8 and 12.

Example: How does cyberbullying occur and how do victims cope? University of Washington social researchers Katie Davis, David P. Randall, Anthony Ambrose, and Mania Orand (2015) were concerned by the prevalence of bullying among adolescents and wondered how youth responded when they were victimized by online harassment. They identified an opportunity to explore this issue through an analysis of 1,096 comments made in response to a blog post by singer/songwriter Amanda Palmer about the suicide of 15-year-old Amanda Todd after a topless picture of her that circulated online led to years of cyberbullying. Davis and her colleagues found that the primary reasons given for having been bullied were physical appearance, sexual orientation, and pursuing nonmainstream interests. Popular coping strategies included seeking social support, finding a creative outlet, ignoring or blocking the bully, as well as self-talk and taking the perspective of the bully in order to understand his or her motivations.

Exploratory research: Seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them.

Explanatory research: Seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon.

Explanatory Research

Explanatory research seeks to identify the causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon. Internet researchers adopted explanation as a goal when they began to ask such questions as "Does the Internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital?" (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton 2001). Chapter 6 focuses on the meaning of causation and how to identify causal effects with experimental methods; Chapter 7 addresses this issue in relation to survey methods.

CAREERS and Research

JESSICA LEBLANC, RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Jessica LeBlanc majored in sociology at the University of New Hampshire, but she didn't really know what kind of career it would lead to. Then she took an undergraduate statistics course and found she really enjoyed it. She took additional methods courses—survey research and an individual research project course—and really liked those also.

By the time she graduated, LeBlanc knew she wanted a job in social research. She looked online for research positions in marketing, health care, and other areas. She noticed an opening at a university-based research center and thought their work sounded fascinating. As a research assistant, LeBlanc designed survey questions, transcribed focus group audiotapes, programmed web surveys, and managed incoming data. She also conducted interviews, programmed computer-assisted telephone surveys, and helped conduct focus groups.

The knowledge that LeBlanc gained in her methods courses about research designs, statistics, question construction, and survey procedures prepared her well for her position. Her advice to aspiring researchers: Pay attention in your first methods class!

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Example: What effect does Internet use have on social relations? Jeffrey Boase, John B. Horrigan, Barry Wellman, and Lee Rainie (2006), sociologists at the University of Toronto at the time (Boase and Wellman) and researchers at the Pew Internet Project (Horrigan and Rainie), sought to understand how the Internet is affecting community life in general and the maintenance of social ties in particular. For this purpose, they analyzed data from two phone surveys, conducted in 2004 and 2005, of 4,401 Americans. Boase and his coauthors (2006) found that the Internet and e-mail help people maintain dispersed social networks and do not conflict with the maintenance of social ties in the local community involving personal or phone contact.

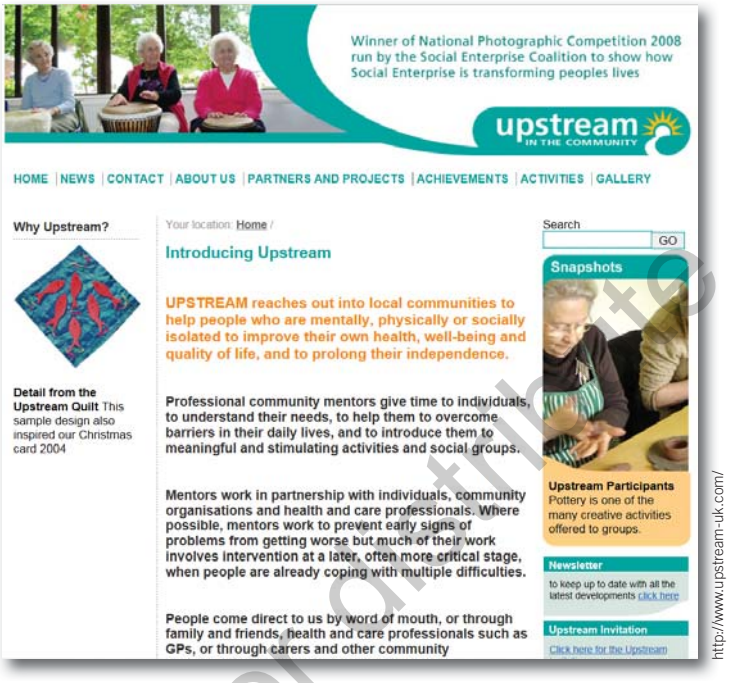


Photo 1.4 Upstream Healthy Living Centre

Evaluation Research

Evaluation research examines programs, policies, or other efforts to affect social patterns, whether by government agencies, private nonprofits, or for-profit businesses. Evaluation can include elements of descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory research. The focus of evaluation research on programs, policies, and other conscious efforts to create change raises some issues that are not relevant in other types of research (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao 2004:337). Chapter 10 reviews the basics of evaluation research.

JOURNAL LINK
Wi-Fi Use

Example: Does a socially oriented intervention improve health and well-being among older people? Colin Greaves and Lou Farbus (2006) evaluated the impact on depression, social isolation, and physical health of a community-based intervention by the Upstream Healthy Living Centre in Devon, England. Upstream provides trained mentors who visit elderly people in their homes frequently to work on creative, exercise, and/or cultural activities ranging from computer activities, painting, and creative writing to Tai Chi, group walks, and book clubs. Activities emphasize social interaction in groups and creative stimulation. Greaves and Farbus conducted qualitative interviews with diverse program participants and some program mentors and administered a quantitative survey to most participants at program entry and then after 6 and 12 months of participation. Both the qualitative and quantitative data provided evidence of improvements in health status and social engagement as a result of program participation. Depression scores improved and perceived social support increased after 12 months, with mixed results on some other measures but many positive comments about program benefits.

❖ Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods

Did you notice the difference between the types of data used in the studies about the Internet? The primary data used in the descriptive survey about Facebook use were counts of the number of people who had particular numbers of social ties and particular kinds of social ties, as well as their age, education, and other characteristics (Rainie et al. 2013). These data were numerical, so we say that this study used **quantitative methods**. In contrast, Keith Hampton and Neeti Gupta (2008) observed Wi-Fi users in public spaces. Because the researchers recorded their actual observations and did not attempt to quantify what they were studying, we say that Hampton and Gupta (2008) used **qualitative methods**.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods involves more than just the type of data collected. Quantitative methods are most often used when the motives for research are explanation, description, or evaluation. Quantitative researchers are often guided by a positivist philosophy. **Positivism** asserts that a well-designed test of a specific prediction—for example, the prediction that social ties decrease among those who use the Internet more—can move us closer to understanding actual social processes. Research guided by positivism

Evaluation research: Research that describes or identifies the impact of social policies and programs.

Quantitative methods: Methods such as surveys and experiments that record variation in terms of amounts. Data that are treated as quantitative are either numbers or attributes that can be ordered by magnitude.

Qualitative methods: Methods such as participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher. These methods rely on written or spoken words or observations that do not often have a direct numerical interpretation and typically involve exploratory research questions, an orientation to social context and human subjectivity, and the meanings attached by participants to events and to their lives.

Positivism: The belief, shared by most scientists, that there is a reality that exists quite apart from our own perception of it, that it can be understood through observation, and that it follows general laws.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

presumes that our perceptions and understanding of the social world can be distorted by errors like those discussed in this chapter, but scientific methods can help us to see and understand reality more clearly.

Exploration is more often the motive for using qualitative methods, although researchers also use these methods for descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative purposes. Qualitative research is often guided by the philosophy of **constructivism**. Constructivist social scientists believe that social reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to reality, not to determine how reality works apart from these constructions. This philosophy rejects the positivist belief that there is a concrete, objective reality that scientific methods help us understand (Lynch & Bogen 1997); instead, constructivists believe that people construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others and that this is as true of scientists as it is of everyone else in the social world.

Chapters 2 and 3 highlight several other differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, and Chapters 8 and 12 present qualitative methods in much more detail.

Important as it is, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative orientations or methods shouldn't be overemphasized. Social scientists often combine these methods to enrich their research. For example, Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman (2000) used surveys to generate counts of community network usage and other behaviors in Netville, but they also observed social interaction and recorded spoken comments. In this way, qualitative data about social settings can be used to understand patterns in quantitative data better (Campbell & Russo 1999:141).

The use of multiple methods to study one research question is called **triangulation**. The term suggests that a researcher can get a clearer picture of the social reality being studied by viewing it from several different perspectives. Each will have some liabilities in a specific research application, and all can benefit from a combination of one or more other methods (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Sechrest & Sidani 1995).

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not always sharp. Qualitative data can be converted to quantitative data, for example, when we count the frequency of particular words or phrases in a text or measure the time elapsed between different observed behaviors. Surveys that collect primarily quantitative data may also include questions asking for written responses, and these responses may be used in a qualitative, textual analysis. Qualitative researchers may test explicit explanations of social phenomena using textual or observational data. We consider a *mixed-methods* strategy in more detail in Chapter 10.

❖ Conclusions

I hope this first chapter has given you an idea of what to expect from the rest of the book. The aim is to introduce you to social research methods by describing what social scientists have learned about the social world as well as how they have learned it. The substance of social science is inevitably more interesting than its methods, but the methods become more interesting when they're linked to examples from substantive investigations.

Understanding the Social World is organized into four sections. The first section on Foundations for Social Research includes the introduction in Chapter 1, and then an overview of the research process in Chapter 2 and an introduction to issues in research ethics and an overview of research proposals in Chapter 3. The second section, Fundamentals of Social Research, presents methods for conceptualization and measurement (Chapter 4), sampling (Chapter 5), and causation (Chapter 6) that must be considered in any social research project. The third section, Social Research Designs, introduces the major methods of data collection used by sociologists: survey research (Chapter 7), qualitative methods (Chapter 8), unobtrusive methods ranging from historical and comparative methods to secondary data analysis (Chapter 9), and evaluation and mixed-methods research (Chapter 10). The last section, Analyzing and Reporting, introduces techniques for analyzing quantitative data with statistics (Chapter 11) and analyzing qualitative data with a variety of techniques (Chapter 12), as well as guidelines for evaluating research reports (Chapter 13).

Constructivism: Methodology based on questioning belief in an external reality; emphasizes the importance of exploring the way in which different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs.

Triangulation: The use of multiple methods to study one research question; also used to mean the use of two or more different measures of the same variable.

Each chapter ends with several helpful learning tools. Lists of key terms and chapter highlights will help you review the ideas that have been discussed. Chapter questions and practice exercises will help you apply and deepen your knowledge. A "Careers and Research" example may help you envision future job possibilities, and a "Research in the News" vignette in each chapter will tie research methods to current events.

The study site for this book on the SAGE website provides interactive exercises and quizzes for reviewing key concepts, as well as research articles to review, websites to visit, data to analyze, and short lectures to hear. Check it out at edge.sagepub.com/schuttusw.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Key Terms

REVIEW key terms with eFlashcards. SAGE edge™

Constructivism 10
Descriptive research 7
Evaluation research 9
Explanatory research 8
Exploratory research 8
Illogical reasoning 6
Inaccurate observation 4
Overgeneralization 4
Positivism 9
Qualitative methods 9
Quantitative methods 9
Resistance to change 6
Science 4
Selective observation 4
Social science 4
Triangulation 10

Highlights

- Social research differs from the ordinary process of thinking about our experiences by focusing on broader questions that involve people outside our immediate experience and issues about why things happen, and by using systematic research methods to answer those questions. Four common errors in reasoning are (1) selective or inaccurate observation, (2) overgeneralization, (3) illogical reasoning, and (4) resistance to change. These errors result from the complexity of the social world, subjective processes that affect the reasoning of researchers and those they study, researchers' self-interestedness, and unquestioning acceptance of tradition or of those in positions of authority.
- Social science is the use of logical, systematic, documented methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes, as well as the knowledge produced by these investigations.
- Social research can be descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative—or some combination of these.
- Quantitative and qualitative methods structure research in different ways and are differentially appropriate for diverse research situations. They may be combined in research projects.
- Positivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes the goal of understanding the real world; this philosophy guides most quantitative researchers.
- Constructivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes the importance of exploring and representing the ways in which different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs. Constructivists interact with research subjects to develop a shared perspective on the issue being studied.

Chapter Questions

TEST your understanding of chapter content. Take the practice quiz. SAGE edge™

The ethical challenges that arise in social research are discussed throughout the book. At the end of each chapter, one of the questions you are asked to consider may be about ethical issues related to that chapter's focus. This critical topic is introduced formally in Chapter 3, but let's begin here with a first question for you to ponder:

1. The chapter refers to research on social isolation. What would *you* do if you were interviewing elderly persons in the community and found that one was very isolated and depressed or even suicidal, apparently as a result of his or her isolation? Do you believe that social researchers have an obligation to take action in a situation like this? What if you discovered a similar problem with a child? What guidelines would you suggest for researchers?
2. Pick a contemporary social issue of interest to you. Describe different approaches to research on this issue that would involve descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and evaluative approaches.
3. Review the description of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Which approach do you prefer and what is the basis of your preference? Would you prefer to take a mixed-methods approach? Why or why not?

Practice Exercises

1. Review the "Letters to the Editor" section of a local newspaper. Which errors in reasoning do you find? What evidence would be needed to correct these errors?
2. Review "Types of Research" from the Interactive Exercises link on the book's study site. To use these lessons, choose one of the four "Types of Research" exercises from the opening menu.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

RESEARCHER INTERVIEW LINK
Online Interviews

About 10 questions are presented in each version of the lesson. After reading each question, choose one answer from the list presented. The program will evaluate your answers. If an answer is correct, the program will explain why you were right and go on to the next question. If you have made an error, the program will explain the error to you and give you another chance to respond.

3. Scan the articles on the book's study site for this chapter. Classify the research represented in each article as primarily descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative. Describe the evidence for your classification (even if the abstract mentions the type of research, look for other evidence). If more than one type of research is represented in an article, also mention that type.
4. Now read one of the articles in detail and decide whether the approach was quantitative or qualitative (or mixed) and whether the authors were guided primarily by a positivist or a constructivist philosophy. Explain your answer.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

SAGE edge™

The Student Study Site, available at **edge.sagepub.com/schuttusw**, includes useful study materials including eFlashcards, videos, audio resources, journal articles, and encyclopedia articles, many of which are represented by the media links throughout the text.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.