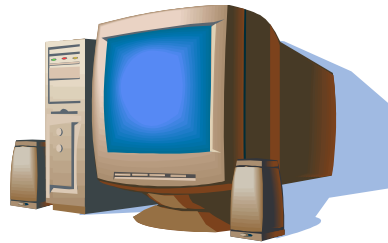


# Chapter Two

## Sociological Methods



## Sociological Research: Not only for the elite

- Sociology has been diversified and democratized, because all sorts of people undertake research and almost everyone is exposed to it.
- This is particularly true of the knowledge, research, and information disseminated by the mass media.

# Society as Text

- *Text*: Anything, written or nonwritten, that is capable of carrying or conveying meaning.
- Society itself is a text, made up of multiple texts about social nature, social relationships, and so on.
- This multitude of texts promises to reveal much about its characteristic social nature, changing social relations and processes.

# Samples, Interviews, and Infotainment

- *Sample*: A portion of a population selected to be the subjects of a particular research project.
- *Interview*: A method of research whereby subjects are asked questions. This can range from a formal set of questions to an informal dialogue or conversation.
- *Infotainment*: A genre of mass media prevalent in postmodern society that provides research results, information, and knowledge in the form of an entertaining media product.

# Television as research

- Television producers often have some knowledge of sociological research methods and findings.
- Director Michael Apter claimed to be carrying out sociological studies as with his television series, *Married in America*.

# Lembo's Studies of Viewing Culture

- Assessing television's meaning for people and the significance it carries in their lives involves nothing short of the analytical reconstruction of it as a distinctive kind of culture, the *viewing culture*.
- Lembo found that half of the population did not separate their television viewing from other activities (viewing is a common social practice and activity at home).

# Lembo's Studies of Viewing Culture

- Instead of television being another crisis in individual identity and community formation, it is a postmodern condition. (Uniformity does not exist as different meanings, perspectives, and experiences become created.)

# Samples in Social Science Research

- *Representative sample (or stratified sample):* A sample that accurately represents the various attributes found in the whole population.
- *Random sample:* A sample that is selected purely statistically.
- *Snowball sample:* A sample created through a process whereby the researchers asks the first few interviewees for the names of others who might fit the study.



# Samples in Social Science Research

- *Survey*: A method of research whereby information is gathered from a sample of a population about a specific list of variables and questions.
- *Opinion poll*: A type of sociological survey in which the members of a population sample are asked about their attitudes and beliefs on a wide range of issues.

# Concepts & Variables

- *Concept*: A mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form.
- *Variable*: A concept whose value changes from case to case. The changing value is noted by an indicator (e.g. *income* might be an indicator of *social class*)
- *Correlation*: A term that refers to the relationship between two variables whose values change together. NOTE: Correlation does not imply causation.

# Independent Variables

- *Independent variable: A variable that causes change in another factor.*
  - *Example: Winter weather can be considered an independent variable, since ice, snow, and cold temperatures cause people to wear scarves and can increase accidents (dependent variables).*

# Dependent Variables

- *Dependent variable:* A variable that changes as a result of independent variables.
  - *Example:* Scarf wearing and car accidents are dependent variables that are a result of winter weather (the independent variable).

# Theories: Social and Explanatory

- *Social theory*: A framework based on empirical evidence that is used to organize concepts and that explains why society or some aspect of society functions as it does.
- *Explanatory theory*: A theory that has one or more causal hypotheses, suggesting that a particular independent variable causes a particular effect on the dependent variable.

# Durkheim's study, *Suicide*

- What happens when social integration is weakened?
  - Sought to form his explanations solely in terms of externally observable rates of covariation of variables—corresponded to variations in the rate of social integration between religious denominations (different social groups).
- One of the earliest examples in Sociology of *secondary* data—information collected for another purpose, often by governments.

# Suicide: A Different Approach

- Sociologists following the example of Max Weber and his *interpretive sociology* have taken a different approach to explaining suicide.
- *Interpretive sociology*: A form of sociology that bases its approach to the task of sociological explanation on the assumption that social actions can be fully understood only by interpreting the motives and meanings that guide individuals' actions.

# Jacobs' Study of Suicide

- (1970) Jacobs examined suicide notes in order to find the reasoning used by would-be suicides in overcoming the moral prohibitions against suicide found in religions.
  - Jacobs constructed schemes of motives for suicide that could be shown to typify the different religious groups.
  - Durkheim's explanation, however, was deliberately free of any terms that would ascribe purposes or motives to the individual.



# Quantitative vs. Qualitative data

- *Quantitative data*: Referring to research that relies on numerical or statistical data for calculating findings. Typically used in cases where one is trying to apply a natural science model of explanation.
- *Qualitative data*: Relating to research that is typically used in cases where one is taking an interpretive approach. The data are often textual, such as interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes.

# Survey Types

- *Census*: A type of social survey in which the questions are designed to gather information that is descriptive of an entire population.
- *Sample survey*: Covers only a fraction of the population, but should be representative of the population in order to generalize the results.

# Field Research

- *Field research*: Research that is based on the observation of behavior rather than on the use of existing quantitative data.
- Field research raises important issues regarding consent and research ethics.
- *Ethnography* is an example of field research.

# Personal Narratives

- *Personal narrative*: A type of qualitative data in which an account of life events is given from the perspective of a narrator, usually the individual being studied.
- *Narrative* does not connote fiction but, rather, a story that is socially constructed and put together.
- Examples of personal narratives include autobiography, oral history, and life history interviews

# Auguste Comte (1800s)

- Expressed the belief that sociology would develop research methods enabling it to discover laws of social behavior, following the example of natural sciences.
- This view (*positivism*) often lies behind the preference for quantitative research methods

# Positivism vs. Relativism

- *Positivism*: An approach to research that follows the example of the natural sciences in that it assumes sociology will employ methods that enable it to discover laws of social behavior.
- *Relativism*: An approach to research that counters positivism by asserting that a particular social behavior may be understood differently if viewed from different perspectives or in different social contexts.

# Joel Best and “Monster Hype”

- The mass media hypes social problems by using a three-part recipe to illustrate the issue:
  - 1.) illustrate the problem with an awful example (mass murder at Columbine High School)
  - 2.) give the problem a name (school shootings)
  - 3.) use statistics to suggest the problem’s size and importance

# Study Questions

- In what ways can society be regarded as a “text”?
- What differences are there between the procedures involved in constructing a television documentary and the procedures used in social science research?



# Study Questions

- One notable difference between television documentaries and much social science research has to do with how they are received by their “audiences.” Discuss this difference in audience reception in terms of the combination of methods employed in Lembo’s research.

# Study Questions

- Why might some groups want to emphasize that all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is only relatively valid?
- List the different types of samples that may be used in social science research.
- What is the difference between an independent variable and a dependent variable?

# Study Questions

- Distinguish between the two forms of sociological explanation of suicide offered, respectively, by Durkheim and Jacobs.
- Outline the different methods of gathering quantitative vs. qualitative data, and list advantages/disadvantages of each.

# Study Questions

- The postmodern culture has been described as “mediatized”—meaning that much of the knowledge and information that we accumulate has been constructed and transmitted by the mass media. Sometimes the process seems to spiral out of control and people are panicked into believing that a threatening social trend is advancing upon them, when in fact a more critical analysis of statistics would counter this belief. How does Joel Best illustrate this point with regard to school violence?