Chapter Two: Sociological Methods

Census: A type of social survey in which the questions are designed to gather information that is descriptive of an entire population.

Concept: A mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form. A concept might also be a category or classification, such as race, gender, or social class.

Correlation: A term that refers to the relationship between two variables whose values change together. It is important to note, however, that correlation does not imply causation. For example, in wintertime, people tend to wear scarves and car accidents tend to occur more often. Increased scarf wearing and increased car accidents are correlated, but this does not mean that wearing a scarf causes car accidents.

Dependent variable: A variable that changes as a result of independent variables. In our wintertime example, scarf wearing and car accidents are the dependent variables.

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.

Field research: Research that is based on the observation of behavior rather than on the use of existing quantitative data. Field researchers select a location and a field site and then spend time observing. They may be participant observers who engage directly in the activities of their field site, or they may remain at a distance. Field research raises important issues regarding consent and research ethics. Ethnography is an example of field research.

Independent variable: A variable that causes change in another factor. In our wintertime example, weather can be considered an independent variable, since ice, snow, and cold temperatures cause people to wear scarves and can increase car accidents.

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. Mass media documentaries are a good example of infotainment, inasmuch as they strive to be informative about a particular subject but also to entertain.

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.

Interview: A method of research whereby subject are asked questions. Interviews can be formal, involving a set list of questions and topics to address, or informal, resembling a conversation or dialogue.

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. An example is the

General Social Survey (GSS), which asks a nationwide random sample of at least 1,500 respondents to address issues such as capital punishment, family statistics, and religiosity.

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. The term *narrative* connotes not fiction but, rather, a story that is socially constructed and put together. Personal narratives can come in many forms, including autobiography, oral history, and life history interviews.

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. Positivists are often inclined toward the use of quantitative data and methods.

Qualitative: Relating to research that is typically used in cases where one is taking an interpretive approach. The data are often textual; examples include interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes.

Quantitative: Referring to research that relies on numerical or statistical data for calculating findings. Quantitative research is typically used in cases where one is trying to apply a natural science model of explanation, as opposed to an interpretive model.

Random sample: A sample that is selected purely statistically. For example, a random sample might include every tenth person in a population, or every hundredth person.

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. In other words, the interpretation of a behavior may vary depending on the perspective or setting. Relativists tend to prefer an interpretive approach to sociology and to rely on qualitative data.

Representative sample: (or *stratified sample*) A sample that accurately represents the various attributes (e.g., race, religion, income, age, gender) found in the whole population.

Sample: A portion of a population selected to be the subjects of a particular research project. In most cases a sample is expected to be a microcosm of the whole population in some respect, such that the findings are generalizable.

Snowball sample: A sample created through a process whereby the researcher asks the first few interviewees for the names of other individuals who might fit the study, then asks those individuals for names, and so on. The problem with snowball samples is that they may be heavily skewed toward particular demographics, because people tend to know and recommend others like themselves.

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.

Survey: A method of research whereby information is gathered from a sample of a population about a specific list of variables and questions.

Text: Anything, whether 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, social processes, and so on.

Variable: A concept whose value changes from case to case. The changing value is noted by an indicator. For example, income might be an indicator of the variable *class*.