Sociology 357: Methods of Sociological Inquiry

Introduction

- ■ **About research methods**
  - ▸ What do you think research methods is?
    - – What are you expecting?
    - – Clarify difference between stats & methods
  - ▸ Why do sociologists need to know how to do research?
  - ▸ What is done with sociological research?
    - – Pure knowledge about society
    - – Social problems –> fix
    - – Public opinion –> policy
    - – Marketing (including politics)

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Introduction

▶ What are some common kinds of research methods?

– Surveys
– Interviews
– Existing documents/archives
– Field research
– Content analysis
– Experiments
– Case studies/retrospective studies

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Overview of course requirements

- Go through syllabus
  - ▸ Texts and readings
  - ▸ Projects and grading
  - ▸ Questions?

- Why should you be excited to be taking this class?
  - ▸ Quote from Jim Lehrer

James Lehrer at SMU commencement: A diploma "does *not* mean you are educat

From the many commencement addresses we've heard and read this year, we submit for your attention the following excerpt from an address by James Lehrer. He is the Lehrer of *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* on PBS-TV, and he gave his talk on May 20 at Southern Methodist University in Dallas:

"I urge you to please keep in mind what the diploma you are

and thus a lifelong hunger more—more ideas, more information, more good thoughts, more challenges, m of everything.

"I must tell you that some the dumbest people I know w to great, prestigious college and universities like SMU...T walked across a stage as you are going to do, with diplom in their hot little hands, pronounced themselves well educated...and proceeded to

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Quote from Jim Lehrer

- "I urge you to please keep in mind what the diploma you are about to receive does not mean. It does not mean you are educated. Quite the contrary. It means, I hope, that you have been opened up to a perpetual state of ignorance. . . and thus a lifelong hunger for more – more ideas, more information, more good thoughts, more challenges, more of everything.

- "I must tell you that some of the dumbest people I know went to great prestigious colleges and Universities . . . They walked across a stage as you are going to do, with diplomas in their hot little hands, pronounced themselves well-educated . . . and proceeded to never read another book, entertain another a fresh idea or tax themselves in any way beyond what was minimally required to make a living, or make it socially, or both."

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Objectives and outcomes of course

- ▸ Things you will learn
- ▸ Ways it can change you
- So – what is the course about?
  - ▸ Basic principles of research: the connection between theory and data, the concepts of inference, control, hypothesis-testing, and measurement
  - ▸ Specific techniques for conducting research: observation, questionnaires, experiments.
  - ▸ Assessing causal relationships: how to decide whether it is reasonable to assume that one thing leads to another. Ruling out alternative explanations
  - ▸ Judging generalizability: can you reasonably assume that someone's results would be found in another time, place, and population.

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Value-free science?

- **Purpose of social science research**
  - ▸ Facts vs. values
    - – What do we mean by a question of fact?
    - – How is this different from a question of value?
    - – Bottom line
      - – Research on questions of fact can be used to help make decisions regarding questions of values.
      - – Examples
  - ▸ Is value-free science possible?
    - – No
    - – We need to use scientific methods to keep our values from biasing our research by doing research that is
      - – Empirical
      - – Objective
      - – Controlled
  - ▸ What kinds of facts?
  - ▸ Are there any facts?

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Article analysis as framework for course

▸ What does an article look like? What does it try to do?

▸ Validity as the critical goal (Schutt) -- Three kinds:
  – External validity (generalizability). Extent to which you can say that findings from your sample will be true of some known population
  – Measurement (construct) validity: Does your measure of a concept really accurately represent that concept?
  – Internal (causal) validity: Do the data and research design allow for the conclusion that A (the independent variable) is a cause of B (the dependent variable)?

▸ What does the article critique look like? Three major sections, with essentially the same titles.

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- Criteria for Article Selection
  - ▶ Must report the results of someone's research in an area of social research. Should have been carried out by the author(s).
  - ▶ Directed at a scholarly audience.
  - ▶ Reports structured research, with variables, statistical analyses, relationships among variables, etc.
  - ▶ May be about any social science topic you choose. Check with me if you have doubts. Research in sociology, political science, psychology, education, or social work are fine.
  - ▶ The following types of articles may NOT be used:
    - – Purely theoretical papers which discuss concepts and propositions, but report no empirical research;
    - – Statistical or methodological papers where the bulk of the work is on the refinement of some new measurement, statistical or modelling technique;
    - – Review or meta-analystic articles, summarizing the research of many past researchers, but reportng no original research by the author;
    - – Popularizations or abridged reports, commonly found in popular newsstand magazines such as Psychology Today or books of readings
    - – Extremely short reports with less than four pages devoted to methods and findings.

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Procedures and Hints

- Procedures. All articles must receive my OK.
  - ▸ Bring me xerox/printed copies of three articles to save yourself time. Do this well before October 17.
  - ▸ No two students may review the same article.
  - ▸ It is OK to use articles you have to read for another class, if they meet all of the above criteria, but you **may not** use the articles in Golden.

- Hints.
  - ▸ Most research reports begin with sections on theory and reviews of others' research, so skim the whole article or read the abstract to determine whether the author reports actual research of his/her own.
  - ▸ Sociology is becoming increasingly complex in its statistical analyses.
    - – I therefore strongly suggest that you use articles no more recent than the 1980's.
    - – A working rule: if you can't understand the analyses presented in the results section, don't choose the article.

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The process of doing research

- **Abstract: the big picture**
  - ▸ The conceptual-empirical cycle

Theory links concepts to theory and data

Ideas: What we think

Theory

Inductive reasoning

Deductive reasoning
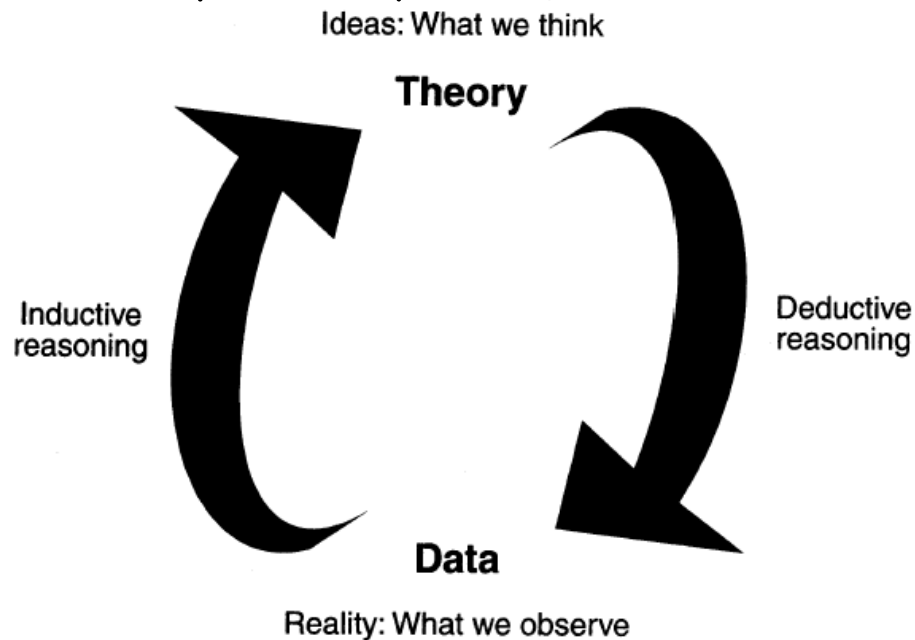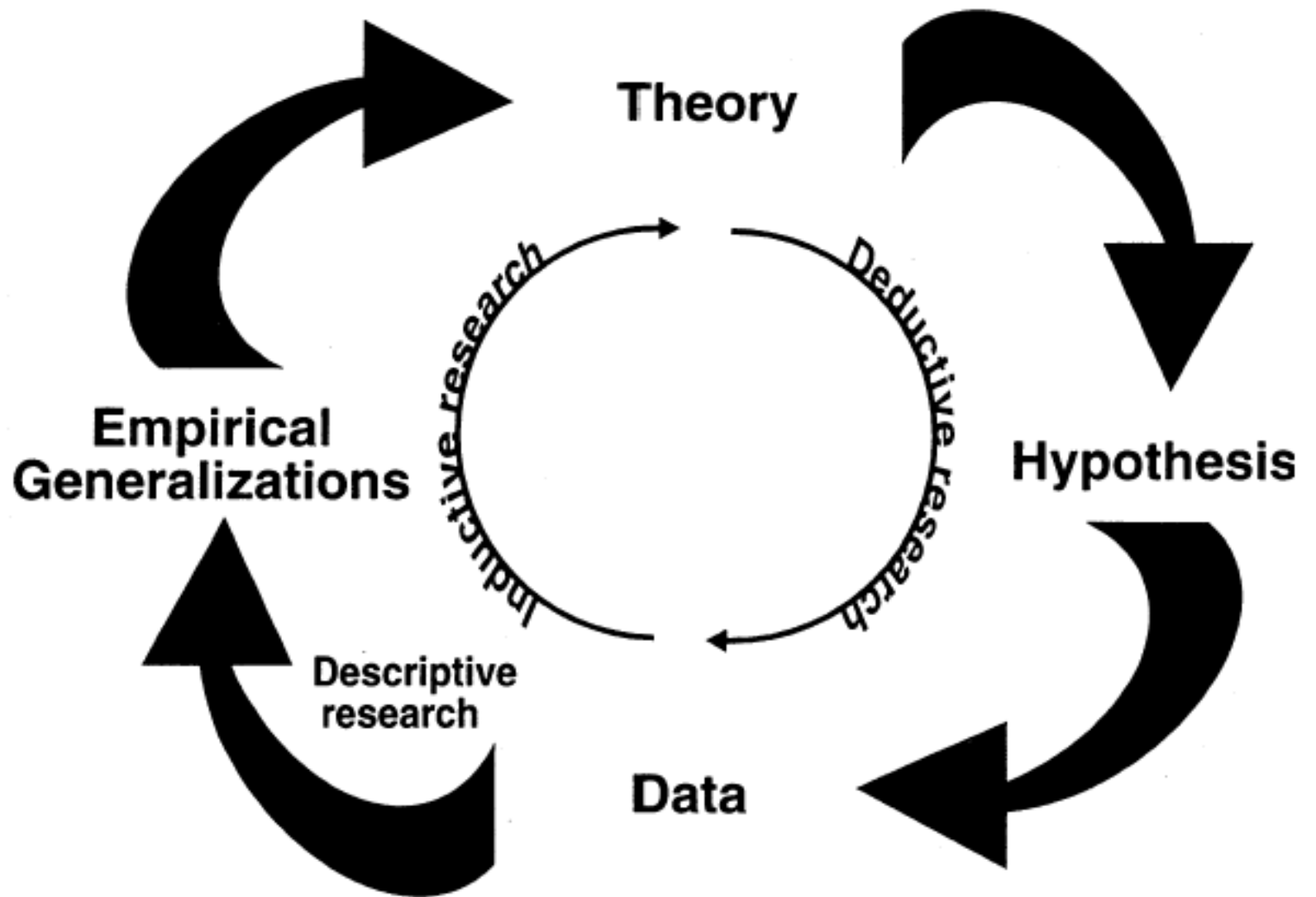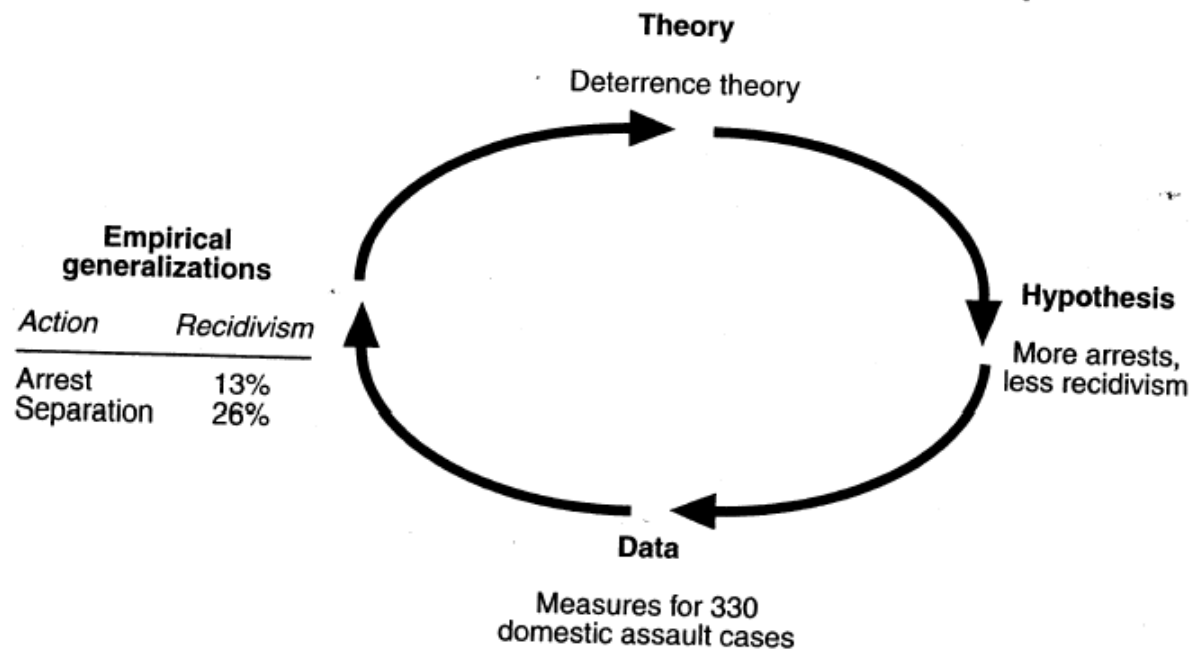
Data

Reality: What we observe

Exhibit 2.4   **The Research Circle**

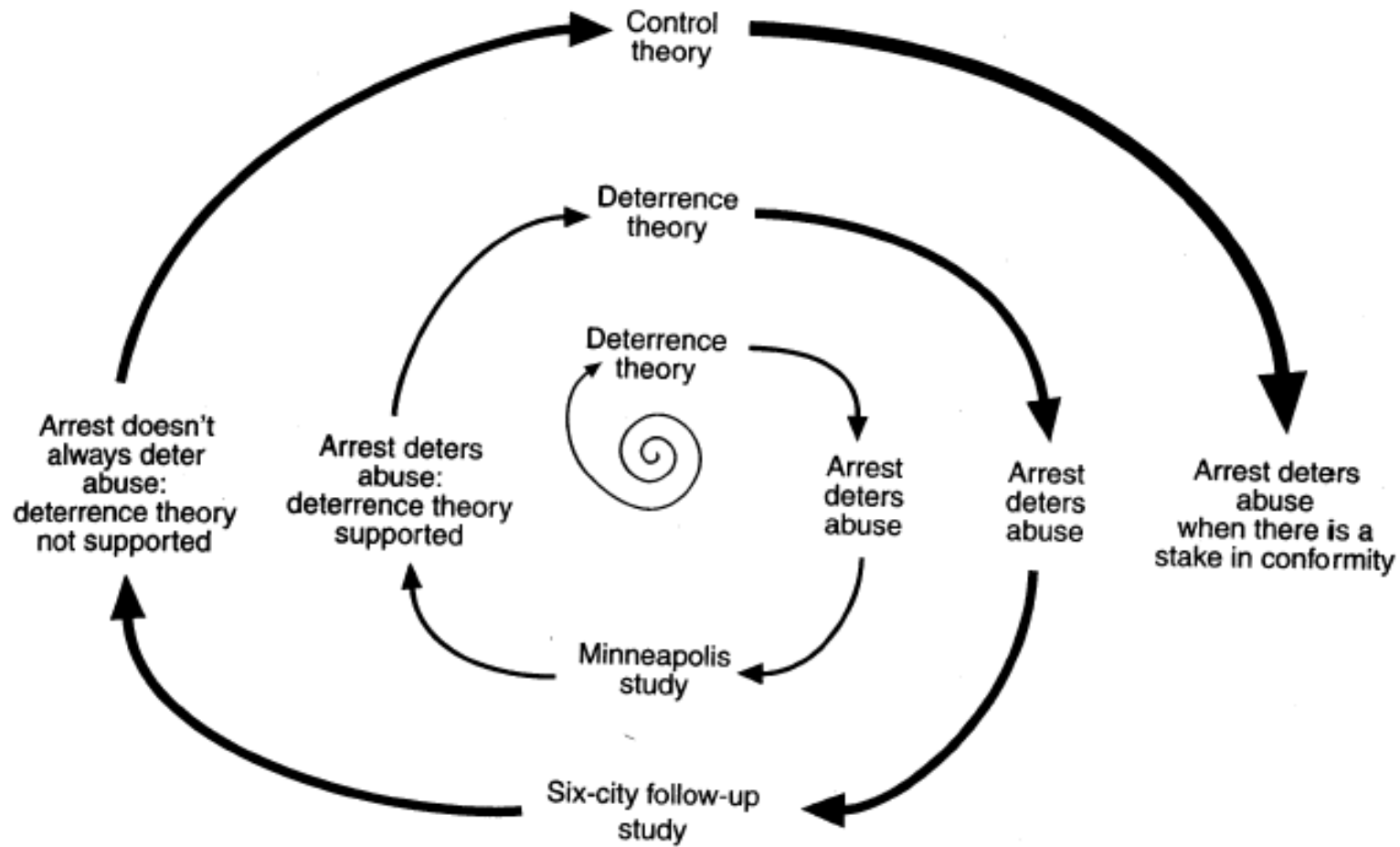# Sociology 357: Methods of Sociological Inquiry

- Replication and extention: how one tests and retests theoretical ideas

Exhibit 2.6 **The Research Circle: Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment**

Theory

Deterrence theory

Hypothesis

More arrests, less recidivism

Data

Measures for 330 domestic assault cases

Empirical generalizations

Action	Recidivism
Arrest	13%
Separation	26%

Source: Data from Sherman & Berk, 1984:267.

Exhibit 2.7 **The Research Spiral: Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment**

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- Concepts, variables, indicators, propositions
  - What is an abstract concept?
    - An abstract word is a word that summarizes many concrete observations and stands for what they have in common.
      - "Democracy" is a term for a particular kind of government, with certain characteristics (voting by the people governed, for example).
      - "Dog" refers to a particular category of animal that has a set of describable characteristics (4 legs, fur, barking (usually), a tail (usually), etc.)
    - In social science, concepts are ways of summing up a set of specific behaviors or qualities one has observed and trying to put them into a higher level of abstraction.
      - E.g., self-esteem, altruism, social class, prejudice, complexity (of organizations), GNP (in economics)
    - Conceptualization is the process of specifying what we mean by a term. Let's take some of the concepts I just listed and say what they mean.
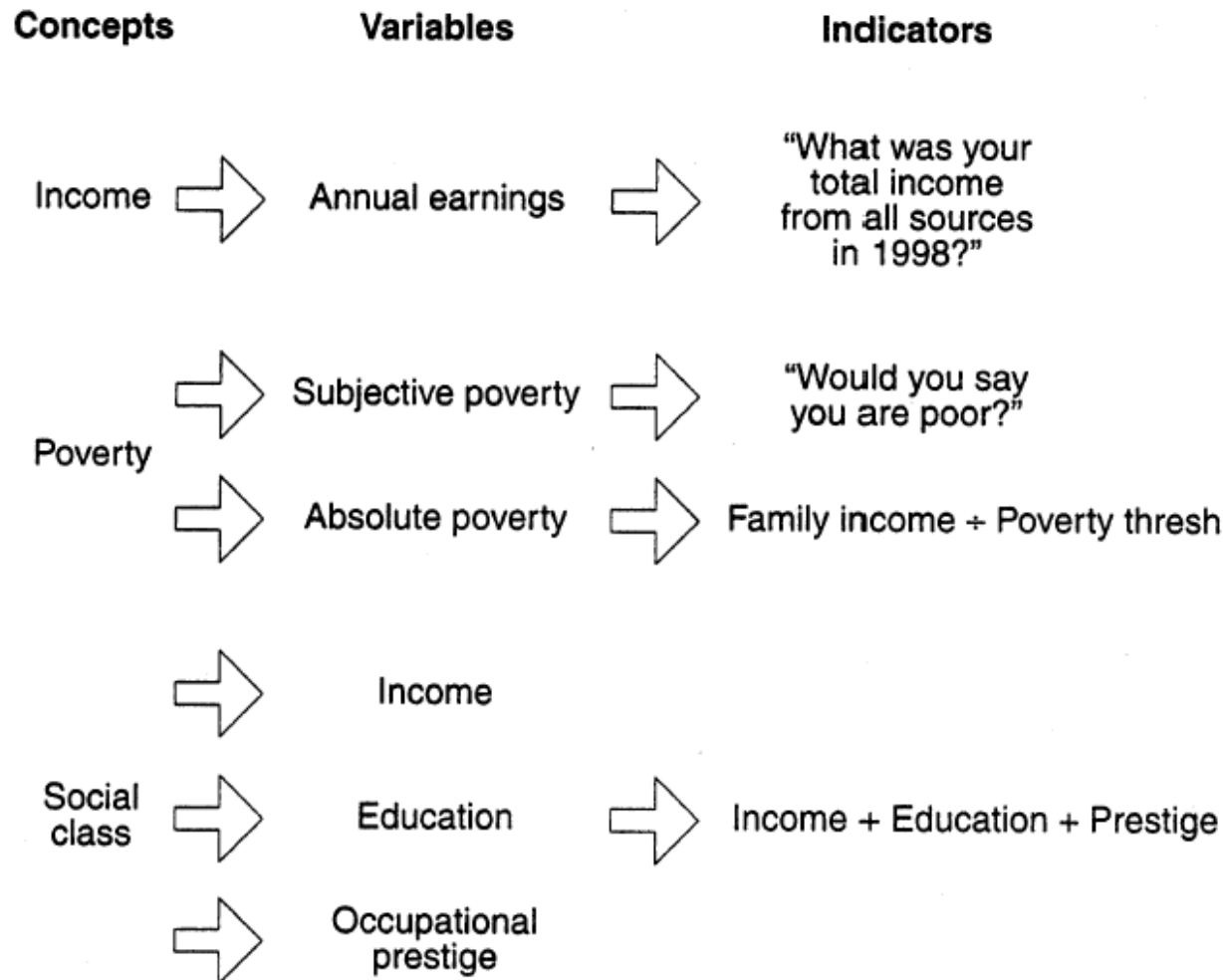
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- ▸ Variables, constants, attributes
  - – A variable is a concept that can take on more than one value;
  - – A constant is a concept that can take on only one value.
  - – A concept (e.g. gender) can be a variable in one context (at the U.W.) and a constant in another (at Mills College, among undergraduates).
  - – An attribute is the particular value of a variable in a particular instance
- ▸ What is operationalization?
  - – The process of "concretizing" the abstraction. Why do we call it that?
    - – Your text says that an "operation" is "a procedure for identifying the value of cases on a variable."
    - – Operationalization is thus the process of specifying the operations.
    - – Example: What is a cake?
  - – Concepts, variables, and indicators. Self-esteem as an example:
    - – Concept: definition
    - – Variable: self-reported self-esteem
    - – Indicator: the 10 items that make up the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and their answer categories.
    - – Attribute for any given individual is the score s/he gets on the scale.

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- More examples:

3.1 Concepts, Variables, and Indicators

Concepts	Variables	Indicators

Income ⇨ Annual earnings ⇨ "What was your total income from all sources in 1998?"

Poverty ⇨ Subjective poverty ⇨ "Would you say you are poor?"

⇨ Absolute poverty ⇨ Family income ÷ Poverty thresh

Social class ⇨ Income

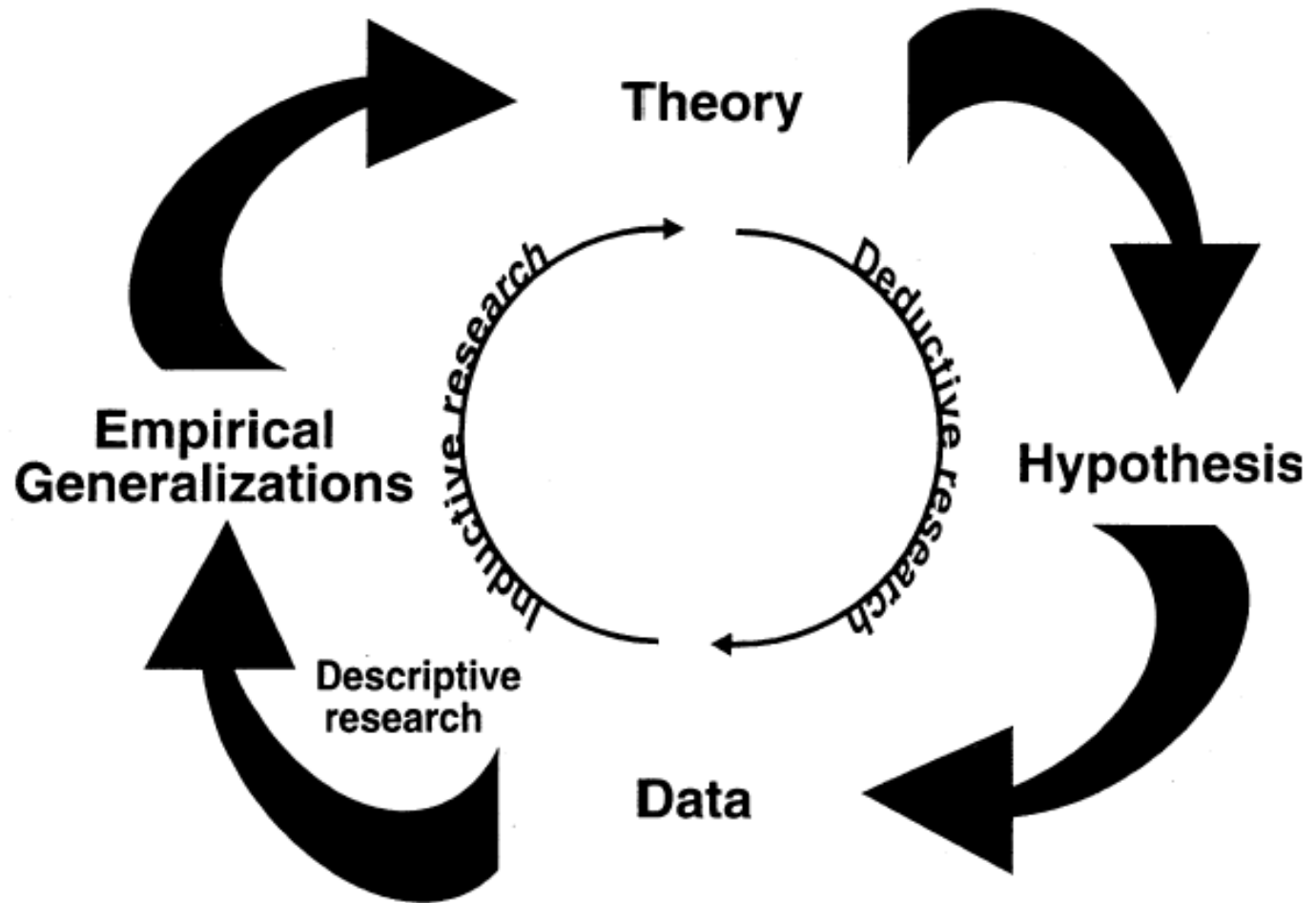⇨ Education ⇨ Income + Education + Prestige

⇨ Occupational prestige

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- Propositions. Statements of fact about one or more variables.
  - Two kinds of propositions used in social science:
    - An hypothesis is a statement about an expected finding or relationship; it is a proposition that has not yet received empirical support.
    - An empirical generalization is a statement reporting an observed finding or relationship.
  - There can be univariate and bivariate propositions.
    - A univariate proposition is one involving only one variable
      - E.g., The majority of students on the Madison campus are in favor of some form of affirmative action.
      - Or, most Americans are in favor of the death penalty.
    - A bivariate proposition states a relationship (expected or observed) between two variables – bi -variate -- such that a change in one implies a change in the other.
      - E.g."Northern college students are more supportive of affirmative action than are Southern college students"
      - "Voters in states that do not have the death penalty will be more opposed to it than voters in states that do have the death penalty."
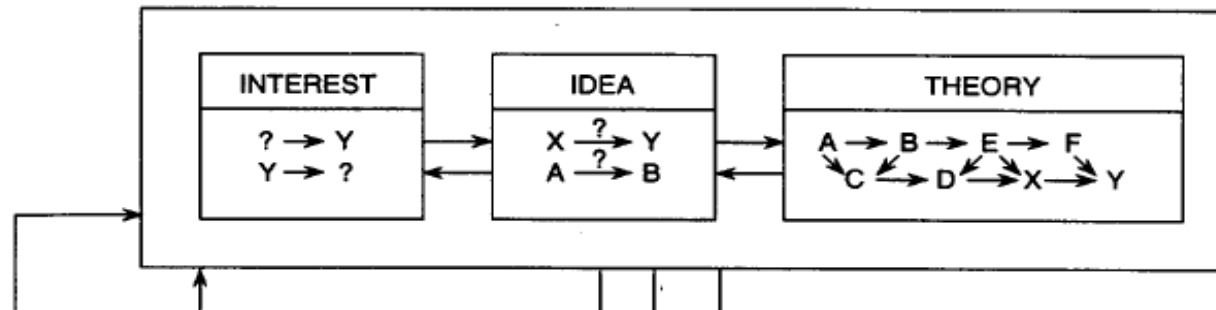
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Exhibit 2.4   **The Research Circle**

Theory

Deductive research

Hypothesis

Inductive research

Empirical Generalizations

Data

Descriptive research

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- The process of doing research: concrete
  - ▸ Where do ideas come from?

Figure 4-2 The Research Process

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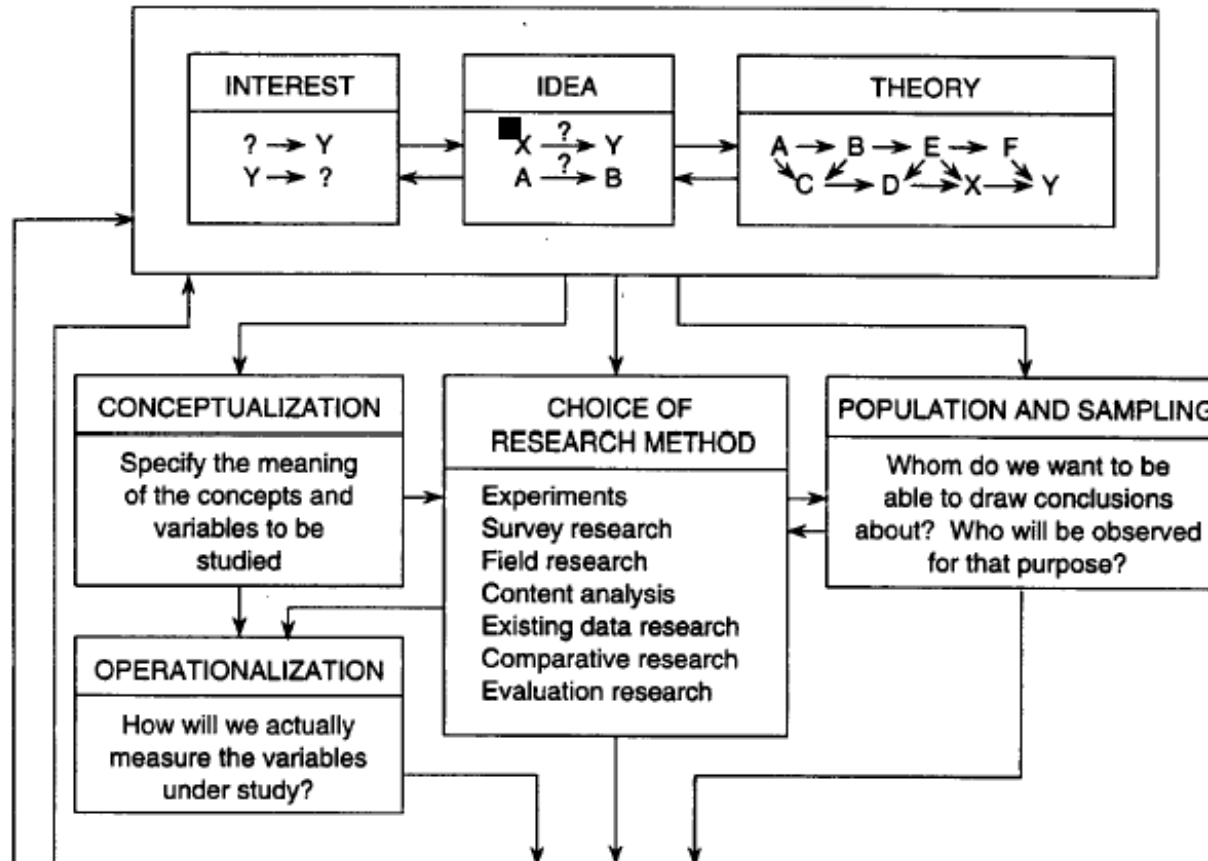- How do you choose a research method?
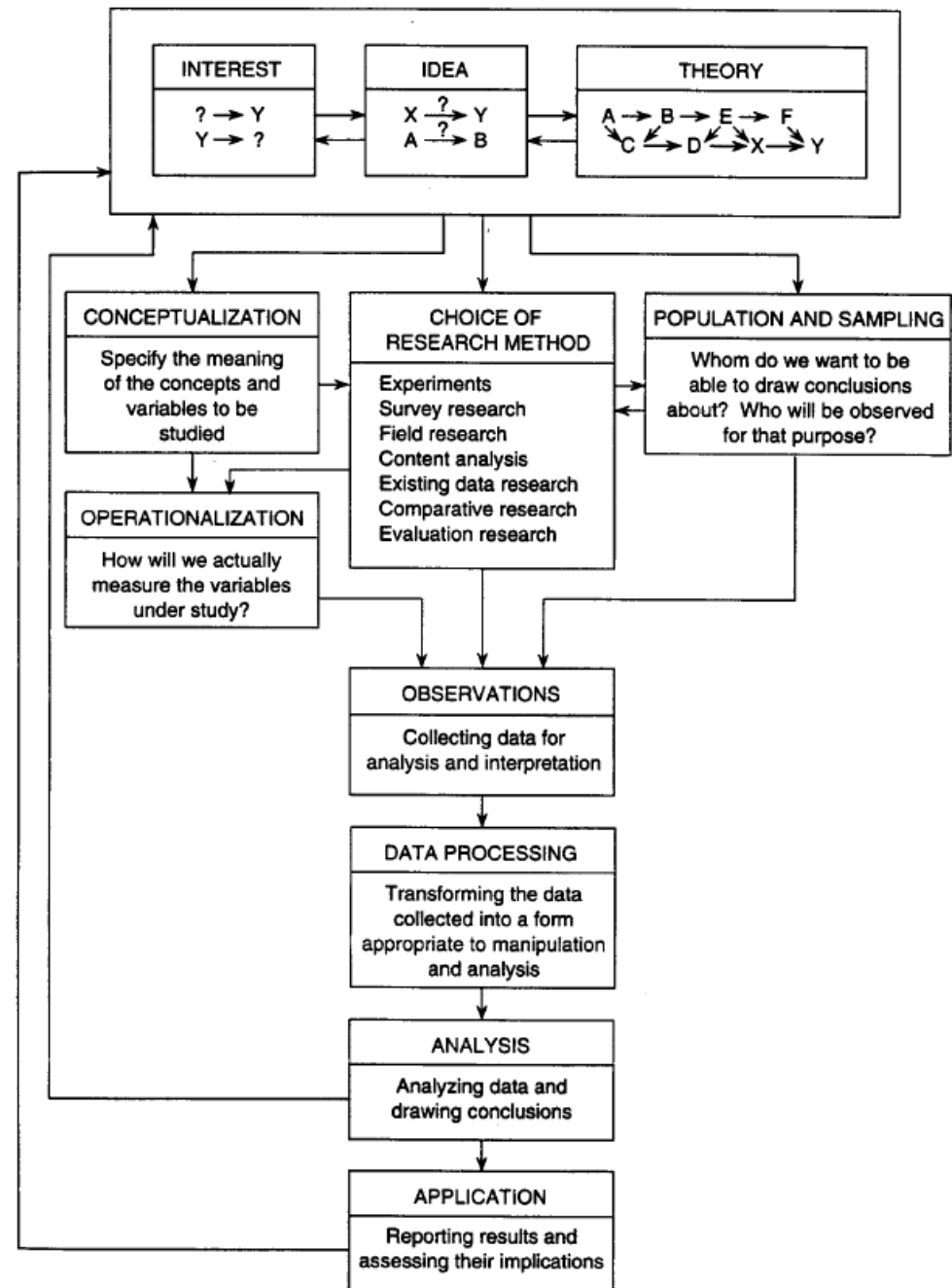
Figure 4-2 The Research Process

How do you:
- ▸ Collect the data?
- ▸ Process the data?
- ▸ Analyze the data?

Figure 4-2 The Research Process

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▶ Independent and dependent variables in bivariate propositions.
  – Only appropriate to use these terms when the relationships are thought to be causal.
  – In these cases, then, the independent variable is the cause and the dependent variable is the effect.
  – An independent variable in one proposition can be a dependent variable in another.
    – E.g. Males have higher self-esteem than females [self-esteem is dependent];
    – Self-esteem can contribute to social mobility [self-esteem is independent].

■ Homework for next time involves writing one proposition based on something you read in the newspaper. [Any paper-- campus paper, NYTimes, WiscState Journal, etc.]
  – You will not FIND a proposition in the paper. The paper reports a concrete instance of something occurring. You will then FORMULATE a proposition – a generalization from the specific. Examples (from a 1992 NY Times).
  – Women's participation in the workplace is related to the age of their children.-- this one is easy – it was a study from the census.
  – As economic conditions worsen, attacks on outgroups and outgroup symbols will increase or More attacks on outgroups and outgroup symbols occur under bad as compared to good economic conditions.