

Sociology 357

Methods of Sociological Inquiry

Lecture Notes #1
Basic Methodological Concepts

Getting Started

- Why bother to learn how to do research?
 - Answer questions important to us
 - Informed consumer of others' research
- Empirical statements
 - Possible to be true or false
 - Truth/falsehood can be determined by observation
- Values
 - What ought to be, what is good or bad
 - Distinguished from empirical statements
 - Influence selection of research topics

Nonscientific Approaches to Knowledge

- Unsupported assertions – no evidence at all
- Appeals to authority
 - Need to evaluate the authority
 - Have to do this sometimes
- Casual observation
 - Unconcretized abstractions (e.g. aggressive – specific behaviors unclear)
 - Errors of observation

Errors of Observation

- Inaccurate observation: Simply wrong about what you think you saw
- Overgeneralization: Correct about what you saw, but apply it too broadly
- Selective observation: Only notice what supports your view

Scientific Approach to Knowledge

- Empiricism: take sensory input from the world
- Objectivity: different people can observe the same inputs and “see” the same thing
 - Reliability: observations can be consistently made over time and by different people (about observation)
 - Validity: theoretical/conceptual interpretation of observations is correct (about link between observation and theory)
- Controlled observation to eliminate sources of error in observation
- Knowledge as tentative, subject to further refinement

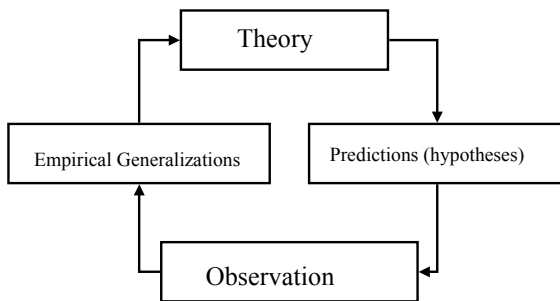
Scientific Attitude

- Knowing better than not knowing
- About things outside you, not introspection
- Respect the evidence, prefer unpleasant truth to self-delusion
- Always tell the truth about your research, no matter what
- Recognizes the boundaries of expertise

Studying People

- Free will vs. social patterns
 - Social constraints on choices (e.g. money, laws)
 - Social effects on choices lead people to **want** to behave in certain ways
- Probabilistic thinking
 - Recognize both the general tendency and the variation around that tendency
- Understanding (verstehen) vs prediction, explanation

The Scientific Process



Theory

- Not “idle speculation” but coherent accounts of how things work
- Theory is part of science: making sense of what the distinct observations mean, how they are related
- Abstractions are concretized: theoretical elements have connections to empirical phenomena
- Explanation and prediction as equivalent

Goals of Scientific Research

- Description. Accurate description of what is actually happening is the bedrock of science.
 - Comparative description documents changes over time or differences between subjects.
- Explanation and Prediction. Provide a theoretical account for observations as part of a larger understanding of how the world works, and predict future observations
- Understanding. Of people, why they do what they do. Of social systems, how they work and why they work that way.

Research Steps

- Define a problem of interest
- Identify empirical questions within that problem
- Use/create a general theoretical framework for understanding the problem
- **Concretize the concepts in the theory**
 - **operationalize the variables**
- Define the sample
- Collect data
- Analyze data
- Draw conclusions
