

# Principles of Sociology

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# Principles of Sociology

## 4th Session

**Sociological Research Methods: Qualitative  
and quantitative research methods**

# **The goal of Sociological research**

- Sociology is a scientific endeavour, as it involves systematic methods of empirical investigation, the analysis of data and the assessment of theories in the light of evidence and logical argument.
- The link between *empirical data* and *theory* is one of the main target of sociological research.
- The conceptual framework permits the interpretation of empirical data.
- Sociological research is not confined to recording of data and aspects of social life, but tends to the *explanation* or *understanding* of social phenomena.
- Sociological research attempts to go beyond surface-level understandings of ordinary life.
- The prime interest and task of sociological research is the explanation and/or understanding/interpretation of social reality.
- Sociological *quantitative research methods* are oriented to “explanation” of social phenomena, whether *qualitative research methods* strive for “understanding” of these.

**Quantitative and qualitative methods:  
Different methodological orientations**

- *Quantitative research methods* are supported by sociological theories that belong to the positivist sociological tradition (A. Comte, E. Durkheim, structural-functional theory).
- The basic postulate of positivist approach refers to the image of social reality as an objective order of things, that is external to individuals.
- Social reality consists of elements empirically given, that systematic empirical sociological observation has to point out.
- Since empirical data exist as items available for observation, research process becomes a kind of control of theory in the face of empirical data.
- Research starts from a certain theory about social phenomena.
- Empirical control of theoretical hypotheses confirm or modify these and the specific theory for the certain social phenomenon.
- Collection and statistic analysis of a vast number of data is deemed that attributes *validity* to research findings, and so it permits the *generalization of findings*.
- The proper research methods enable us to acquire an objective image of social reality and to designate the causal mechanisms, normalities, laws that govern social phenomena.

- *Qualitative research methods* are supported by different theoretical assumptions, that belong to interpretive tradition in social science [interpretive philosophical school (hermeneutics), weberian sociology, (Verstehen), phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, theory of symbolic interactionism].
- The understanding of social phenomena requires the knowledge about modes of signification and action.
- Social structures and relations are not independent from individuals neither are imposed to them in an absolute and deterministic way.
- Social reality is constructed by the ways which humans define and signify it, as well as by their modes of action in the context of communication and social interaction with one another.

- On the base of this image of social reality's construction, the methodological approach refers to the use of an initially liquid, flexible and open conceptual framework, whose concepts are in relation of constant dialogue with collected empirical data (*building of the theory*).
- Qualitative sociological research seeks for:
  - 1) a dense, detailed description of social groups, social phenomena
  - 2) a profound understanding of social meanings and social practices
  - 3) the compatibility of research's findings with other social groups and conditions under which the specific social phenomenon may be manifested.
- The combination of quantitative and qualitative research findings can offer a more comprehensive understanding and explanation of the social phenomena.

- **The impact of Sociological Knowledge on Social reality**
- *Policy-oriented research*
- Sociological research seeks to inform interventions aimed at improving social life.
- *Interchange between sociological research and human behaviour*
- Sociology stands in a 'reflexive relation' to the human beings whose behavior is studied.
- Sociological research influences our common-sense knowledge of society.

# The research process

- **1) Defining the research problem**
- **2) Reviewing the Literature**
- **3) Formulating a Hypothesis** (*definition of variables- development of operational definitions*)
- **4) Choosing a Research Design**
- **5) Collecting the Data**
- **6) Analyzing the Data**
- **7) Stating Conclusions**

# Causation and correlation

## ● Variables

- A variable is any dimension along which individuals or groups vary (e.g. age, differences in income, social-class differences).
- Scientists investigate cause-and-effect relationships, namely the relationships among variables.
- An **independent (causal) variable** is one that causes an effect.
- The **dependent variable** is the variable that is affected.

## ● Correlation

- Correlation means the existence of a regular relationship between two sets of occurrences or variables.
- Scientists attempt to predict the relationship they will find between the independent and dependent variables.
- The test of hypothesis refers to the determination of the degree of association that exists between an independent and a dependent variable.

- **Causal and non-causal relationships**

- A correlation exists if a change in one variable is associated with a change in the other variable.
- Correlation does not mean causation.
- An observed correlation does not imply a causal relationship between variables.
- To find out a causal connection between variables, we hold some variables constant in order to look at the effects of others.
- This control enable scientists to judge between explanations of observed correlations, separating causal from non-causal relationships.
- We have to control other possible influences that might explain the correlation.
- As social reality is complex, due to the dense web of social factors that construct it, the final and absolute conclusion on causal relationship between variables is an extremely hard, and almost unachievable, task.

# RESEARCH METHODS:

## Qualitative and Quantitative methods

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

## ● **Ethnography**

- A type of fieldwork using *participant observation* and *interviews* as main research methods.
- The investigator hangs out, works or lives with a group, organization or community and perhaps takes a direct part in their activities.
- *Advantages*
- Ethnography provides information on the behavior of people in groups, organizations and communities, and also on how those people understand their own behavior.
- We can acquire an in-depth knowledge and understanding of relatively small-scale social phenomena.

- *Difficulties*

- 1) Some types of fieldwork may even be physically dangerous.
- 2) Only small groups or communities can be studied.
- 3) It's difficult for researcher to gain confidence of the under study individuals.
- 4) A researcher may loses the perspective of an outside observer, in the case that he/she begins to identify so closely with the group.

## ● **Focus group**

- Focus groups are “group interviews” in which a particular group of people are gathered together to discuss a subject and exchange views.
- The researcher moderates and largely directs the group discussion, by asking certain questions relating to the object of research.
- **Advantages**
- Focus groups can increase the size of a sample.
- Due to their interactive nature, any possible misunderstandings can be clarified, thereby increasing the validity of a study’s findings.
- **Disadvantages**
- Researcher in a focus group is more participant than detached observer .
- Researcher may influence the responses of the participants, as they may behave and answer according to their perception of the researcher’s expectations.

## ● **Biographical research**

- Biographical research's methods:
- **a)** oral histories
- **b)** narrations
- **c)** Autobiographies
- **d)** Biographies
- **e)** life histories:
- Life histories consist of biographical material assembled about particular individuals through interviews with them.
- Social scientists also use as their sources letters, contemporary reports and newspaper descriptions, in order to confirm the validity of the information that individuals provide.

## ● **Historical analysis**

- If sociologists want to investigate aspects of social life on earlier times, they are engaged in documentary research.
- ***Primary documentary sources:***
  - 1) written records (books, photo collections, archives)
  - 2) diaries
  - 3) official sources (policy documents, records of births and deaths, tax records)
  - 4) private archives (private companies, social organizations)
  - 5) mass media documents (magazines, newspapers)
- ***Secondary documentary sources:***
  - Accounts of historical events written by people afterwards

# Quantitative Methods

## ● **Surveys**

- Survey is the quantitative research method that allow social phenomena to be measured and analyzed using mathematical models and statistical techniques.
- The main research tool is questionnaire.
- Forms of using questionnaires:
  - a) face-to-face interviews
  - b) telephone calls
  - c) postal questionnaires
  - d) online, via the Internet and email.
- **Advantage**
  - The great advantage of surveys is that they allow researchers to collect large amounts of comparable data, which can be manipulated, using computer software, to find out the relationships (correlations, causal relationships) between variables.

## ● Types of Questionnaires

### ● *1) Standardized questionnaires (fixed choice questions and answers)*

#### ● **Advantage**

- Responses are easy to count and compare.

#### ● **Disadvantage**

- The fixed choices responses restrict the information that individuals provide.
- The researcher's signification of the object of study may be imposed on interviewees' perception.

### ● *2) Open-ended questionnaires*

#### ● **Advantage**

- Respondents can express their views in their own words.
- Open-ended questionnaires typically provide more detailed information than standardized ones.
- The researcher can utilize respondent's answers in order to investigate more deeply his/her perception and thought.

#### ● **Disadvantage**

- Due to the lack of standardization, respondents' answers are more difficult to be categorized and so to be compared statistically.

- **3) *semi-structured questionnaires***

- The semistructured interview questionnaire includes some standardized questions and interview which prompts for more in-depth answers.
- Semi-structured interview is articulated on a schedule that permits the wider discussion on relevant research themes.

- **Pilot studies**

- A pilot study is a trial run in which just a few people complete a questionnaire.
- The purpose of a pilot study is to uncover ambiguities and possible misunderstandings that queries may induce.

## ● **Sampling**

- When sociologists are interested in the characteristics of large numbers of individuals they engage in sampling, namely they concentrate on a sample of the overall group.
- The properly chosen population sample supports the generalization of the findings to the total population.
- The representativity of the sample requires the group of participants to be typical of the population as a whole.
- The technique of **random sampling** ensures that every member of the population has the same probability of being chosen.
- **Snowball sampling**: Participants are used to recruit other participants.
- **Convenience sampling**: Researcher take his/her sample from wherever he/she can.

- **Advantages of surveys**

- 1) Responses to questionnaires can be easily quantified and analyzed.
- 2) large numbers of people can be studied.
- 3) surveys offers the possibility of a statistical analysis of collected data, and so of generalization of the findings.

- **Disadvantages of surveys**

- 1) The high levels of non-responses dispute the claims of representativity.
- 2) Little is known about those who choose not to respond to surveys or refuse to be interviewed.

## ● **Content analysis**

- Content analysis is “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text”.
- Content analysis modifies secondary, qualitative, material to quantitative data.
- This process consists of systematic measurement of units (word, paragraph, theme) of research material, in terms of certain categories that are constructed by researcher and result from theoretical hypotheses.
- This method is mainly associated with the analysis of written and oral discourse in the context of mass media (articles, advertisements, political speeches, TV shows, radio programs), but also is deployed for the analysis of other forms of communication and messages (interviews, diaries, novels etc).

- Content analysis is a method that leads to the systematic codification of spoken and written discourse and to the construction of conceptual categories.
- Categories are defined by research goal and theoretical background.
- In quantitative content analysis, the initial categories do not change.
- In qualitative content analysis, collected data are in dialectic relationship with initial, conceptual categories, that, depending their adequacy, are modified or not.
- Codified quantitative data, that result from content analysis, are correlated with statistic methods.
- Statistical processing of data reveals statistic correlations on whose base survey's hypotheses are tested.

## ● Experiments

- An experiment is the attempt to test a hypothesis under highly controlled conditions established by an investigator.
- Experiments are often used in the natural sciences, as they offer major advantages over other research procedures. In an experimental situation the researcher directly controls the circumstances being studied.
- The use of experiment in sociological research is very restricted.
- In cases that sociologists want to investigate group dynamic, then the method of experiment can be used.
- The *disadvantages* of sociological experiments are:
  - a) The laboratory setting is a controlled environment and differs largely from social world.
  - b) Participants know that they are being studied and may not behave normally.

# ● Bibliography

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