

PREFACE

Is the unemployment rate a reliable indicator of economic prosperity? How should we measure unemployment? Is unemployment rising or falling over the course of time? You can find analysts who say both. Then, whom do you believe? And why should the answer depend on who you ask? Why can't we just know? Why are pundits still debating some of these questions that seem easy to answer?

To answer questions like these, we usually have to do some sort of research. Social research helps us find the right questions, judge which sources of data are most valid for what we need to know, ask critical questions about public policy issues and reports, and derive our own conclusions with some degree of certainty. Even when we seek answers in other researchers' findings, we still need to conduct research of our own to assess which of the published reports to trust.

This book shows students the steps involved in the research process, the various strategies for conducting a valid social inquiry, and, perhaps most important, the persuasiveness and elegance of reliable social research. We accomplish these ambitious tasks through the power of benchmark cases from various fields in sociology. Benchmarks are exemplary demonstrations of ways to do things. In social research, benchmark studies are taken as best-case scenarios from which we learn the advantages and disadvantages of particular methodologies and techniques. In this book we have therefore

collected a set of readings that can help us think about how to conduct research. In addition, our introductory sections for each chapter put the readings in the context of each of the steps in the research process. Through the combination of best-case illustrations and a clear framework, we hope students can best understand the research process.

Measuring the social world is a complex process. Social research is concerned with things that keep changing even as we measure them, and that change even more because we measure them. In fact, much of the time we study how things are to provide useful information that will help us change the things we are studying. For example, we use employment rates to refine market policies and to judge the performance of governmental policymaking. We use health data to improve health and health care services. So what was true yesterday might not be as valid today, in part because we are constantly measuring and improving the world (or trying to). That's a quandary of research. The more research we do, the more we need to continue our research to decipher the information we confront every day.

Social research skills are important to us at the individual and community level as well. We (as a society) use such information for many other reasons beyond evaluating social policies, and some of these reasons can create problems in our lives. Elected officials use social data to show that they should remain in power. Corporations

use social data to sell products. Individuals use the same information to win arguments. People use information very selectively to support their interests. Some people question whether people ever landed on the moon, or whether slavery was really all that bad for the slaves. (“Since you weren’t there,” the argument goes, “you don’t really know.”) So, not only are our data always changing, but we are surrounded by others who want to convince us the information says something very different from what we think it says. How can we, the consumers of information, ever know what’s going on?

We can. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed that “sociology is a martial art, a means of self-defense.” Social research methods teach us how to see through the noise of information, misinformation, and casual oversimplification to get to the underlying patterns of meaningful data. It is a tool for your personal and social well-being. It’s all about managing the data yourself so that you can draw your own conclusions. It’s how you know what’s going on.

The research articles and excerpts presented in this book will step you through the different stages of research, from asking questions to measuring data to drawing valid conclusions and rejecting alternatives that don’t stand up to close examination. Each section will provide you with one carefully crafted tool for your toolbox. In keeping with the book’s central purpose and our desire to instruct future researchers with viable illustrations, we organize the readings along the following logic: The first section discusses how to start your research. Here, we review the importance of conceptualizing a research question and the uses of theory to stimulate viable research inquiries and jump-start the research process. The second part tackles the ever-important consideration of how to measure and design a particular study and how to select the population and location for your research. Then, we proceed to weigh the role of ethics and

political considerations during the research experience. In the section analyzing data collection, such qualitative and quantitative techniques as *surveys*, *interviews*, *focus groups*, *experiments*, and *fieldwork* (*observations* and *ethnographies*) are illustrated. The data analysis technique readings include both *statistical analysis* (including *secondary analysis of available data*) and *content analysis* (including *historical* and *cultural data*). We conclude with an examination of *evaluation research*, *case studies*, and *comparative–historical* research as examples of the benefits of mixed methods.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once observed that everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. But how can you tell whose facts are valid? The answer is often found by understanding how those facts were ascertained, that is, the methods used in designing and conducting the research that “determined” those facts. This book, with its examples of sociology’s best and most engaging research methods, will help you figure out if the data presented from any study should be believed, rejected, or taken with a boatload of qualifications. This knowledge will also help you design your own research and draw meaningful conclusions from it. We hope it will also show you how creative and exciting good research methods can be. At the very least, no matter what you think of this or that research method, you will improve the ability of one source that you must trust: yourself.

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