

Sociology

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Stages of the Research Process: Research Methods

What are the primary forms of research that sociologists use?

We now turn to the major methods that sociologists use to gather the information they analyze in their research. The table below summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of each method. On this page and the next, each of these methods will be discussed in more detail.

Table 2.1

| Major Sociological Research Methods | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Method | Advantages | Disadvantages |
| Existing Data | Because existing data have already been gathered, the researcher does not have to spend the time and money to gather data. | The data set that is being analyzed may not contain data on all the variables in which a sociologist is interested or may contain data on variables that are not measured in ways the sociologist prefers. |
| Content Analysis | Content analysis is unobtrusive and often less expensive and time-consuming. | There is considerable variation in the amount of time it can take, and it is labor-intensive. Coding can be subjective. |
| Survey | Many people can be included. If the survey is given to a random sample of the population, its results can be generalized to the greater population. | Large surveys are expensive and time-consuming. Although much information is gathered, it tends to be relatively superficial. |
| Experiments | If random assignment is used, experiments provide fairly convincing data on cause and effect. | Because experiments do not involve random samples of the population, their results cannot be readily generalized to the overall population. Also, experiments tend to be artificial, which can affect the respondents' behavior. |
| Observation (Field Research) | Observational studies may provide rich, detailed information about the people who are observed. | Because observational studies do not involve random samples of the population, their results cannot be readily generalized. Also, the researcher has less control over the data. |

Multiple-Choice Question

Which of the following is an advantage of using surveys as a research method?

- They always provide rich, detailed information about the people being studied.
- Many people can be included.
- The researcher doesn't have to spend time or money to gather data.
- They provide convincing data on cause and effect.

Existing Data

Sometimes sociologists do not gather their own data but instead analyze existing data that someone else has gathered. The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, gathers data on all kinds of areas relevant to the lives of Americans, and many sociologists analyze census data on such topics as poverty, employment, and illness. Sociologists interested in crime and the legal system may analyze data from court records, while medical

sociologists may analyze data from patient records at hospitals. Analysis of existing data such as these is called secondary data analysis. Its advantage to sociologists is that someone else has already spent the time and money to gather the data. A disadvantage is that the data set being analyzed may not contain data on all the variables in which a sociologist may be interested or may contain data on variables that are not measured in ways the sociologist might prefer.

Nonprofit organizations often analyze existing data, usually gathered by government agencies, to get a better understanding of the social issue with which an organization is most concerned. They then use their analysis to help devise effective social policies and strategies for dealing with the issue.

Multiple-Choice Question

Which of the following is an example of secondary data analysis?

- a sociologist interviewing incarcerated felons, and using the interview data to make recommendations for changes to prison education initiatives
- a high school teacher analyzing his class's test scores to determine what kind of review work is needed
- a political campaign conducting a telephone poll and using the results to craft the candidate's message
- an international child-wellness nonprofit analyzing data on average breastfeeding duration collected by the World Health Organization

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a way of studying society by studying the way it communicates. A sociologist might analyze the content of books, television programs, songs, movies, television commercials, web clips, diary entries, newspaper or magazine articles, websites, and so forth. As with other research methodologies, researchers start with a research question and then use patterns they see in the content they are analyzing to answer that question. They do this by creating a coding system to systematically analyze the patterns in the content. Researchers might, for example, look at the gendered messages sent by birthday cards targeting women versus those targeting men, or they might compare the way ideas about the economy are presented in television programs targeting older people versus those targeting a younger audience, or perhaps how different races were depicted in television programs across multiple decades.

Content analysis is relatively inexpensive and can, in some cases, be less lengthy than other research methods. This can vary, though! Researchers doing a large-scale content analysis of television would have to watch many hours of content, taking careful notes to relate the ideas they saw to the framework they created. One problem that often comes up with content analysis is that coding can be subjective. People may view the same thing and interpret it differently. When sociologists do content analysis, they often control for this by having multiple people code the same material and then compare how each person assigned meaning within the framework to make sure bias is minimized.

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