Chapter 1

Social Research Strategies

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Theory and research

• What is a theory?
  – explanation of observed regularities
  – provides a rationale for the research
  – a framework within which social phenomenon can be understood and research findings can be interpreted
  – sometimes relevant background literature relating to atopic acts as the equivalent of a theory
Empiricism

- philosophical approach to theorising
- only knowledge gained through sensory experiences is acceptable
- rigorous scientific testing of theories
- positivist epistemology
- accumulation of ‘facts’ as data
- naïve empiricism?
Deductive and inductive theory

• **Deductivism:**
  - theory --> data
  - explicit hypothesis to be confirmed or rejected
  - quantitative research

• **Inductivism:**
  - data --> theory
  - generalizable inferences from observations
  - qualitative research

See page 9
Deductive and inductive theory

Figure 1.1

The process of deduction

1. Theory

2. Hypothesis

3. Data collection

4. Findings

5. Hypotheses confirmed or rejected

6. Revision of theory

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Deductive and inductive theory

Figure 1.2

Deductive and inductive approaches to the relationship between theory and research

Deductive approach

Theory

Observations/Findings

Inductive approach

Observations/Findings

Theory

See page 11
Epistemological considerations

• what is (or should be) considered acceptable knowledge?
• can the social world be studied ‘scientifically’?
• is it appropriate to apply the methods of the natural sciences to social science research?
• positivist and interpretivist epistemologies

See page 13
Positivist epistemology

• application of *natural science methods* to social science research

*phenomenalism*: knowledge via the senses

*deductivism*: theory testing

*inductivism*: theory building

*objective*, value-free researcher

• distinction between *scientific* and *normative* statements
Realist epistemology

• Similarities to positivism:
  - natural science methods appropriate
  - external reality exists independently of our perceptions

• Empirical (naïve?) realism
  - close correspondence between reality and terms used to describe it
  - direct knowledge of the social world

• Critical realism
  - theoretical terms mediate our knowledge of reality
  - underlying structures generate observable events

See page 14
Interpretivist epistemology

- subject matter of the social sciences (people) demands non-positivist methods
- attempts to see world from the actor’s perspective: subjective reality (Blumer 1962)
- influenced by Symbolic Interactionism

See pages 15-17
Ontological considerations

• social ontology: the nature of social entities
• what kind of objects exist in the social world?
• do social entities exist independently of our perceptions of them?
• is social reality external to social actors or constructed by them?

See pages 18
Objectivist ontology

• social phenomena confront us as external facts

• individuals are born into a pre-existing social world

• social forces and rules exert pressure on actors to conform

• e.g. *culture* exists independently of social actors who are socialized into its values

See pages 18 and 19
Constructionist ontology

• social phenomena and their meanings are constructed by social actors
• continually accomplished and revised
• researchers’ accounts of events are also constructions - many alternative interpretations
• language and representation shape our perceptions of reality

See page 19 and 20
Research strategy: quantitative and qualitative

• useful way of classifying methods of social research

• two distinctive clusters of research strategies: quantitative and qualitative

• these strategies differ in terms of their:
  – general orientation to social research
  – epistemological foundations
  – ontological basis

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Quantitative research

- measurement of social variables
- common research designs: surveys and experiments
- numerical and statistical data
- deductive theory testing
- positivist epistemology
- objectivist view of reality as external to social actors
### Table 1.1

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<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
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<td>Deductive; testing of theory</td>
<td>Inductive; generation of theory</td>
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<td>Epistemological orientation</td>
<td>Natural science model, in particular positivism</td>
<td>Interpretivism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontological orientation</td>
<td>Objectivism</td>
<td>Constructionism</td>
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Qualitative research

• understanding the subjective meanings held by actors (interpretivist epistemology)
• common methods: interviews, ethnography
• data are words, texts and stories
• inductive approach: theory emerges from data
• social constructionist ontology
Mixed methods research

• both quantitative and qualitative research

See page 23 and 24
Influences on the conduct of social research

• Values
  – personal beliefs or the feelings of researcher
  – all ‘preconceptions must be eradicated’ (Durkheim 1858)
  – affect every stage of research process
  – some advocate value-laden research:
    • Becker (1967) sympathy with ‘underdog’ groups
    • feminist research encourages reciprocity (Oakley 1981) and
      ‘conscious partiality’ (Mies 1993)
Influences on the conduct of social research

Figure 1.3

Influences on social research

Theory  Practical considerations  Epistemology

Values

Social research

Ontology

See page 24
Influences on the conduct of research

• Practical considerations
  – time
  – cost/funding available
  – how much prior literature exists (theory testing or theory building?)
  – topic (deviant activities/sensitive issues may be more suited to qualitative research)
  – all social research is a compromise between the ideal and the feasible

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