Instructor’s Manual

*Social Research Methods*, Sixth Canadian Edition

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Chapter 1: General Research Orientations

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Introduction

* Social research is political by nature and is motivated by the following:
  + The need to assess the adequacy of a particular social theory
  + The need to gather information to create theories to solve pressing social problems
  + Personal experience, or the need to explore a social problem that has been important to one’s family, friends, or community
  + A desire to make sense of the world around us

### Theory and research

* There are three common components in a theory:
  + Definitions
  + Descriptions
  + Relational statements, which can be deterministic or probabilistic.
* There are also different types of theories:
  + Middle range theories
    - Merton’s (1967) terminology for theories that are limited in scope and can be tested directly by gathering empirical evidence. For example, Durkheim’s theory of suicide (1897).
  + Grand theories
    - Merton’s (1967) terminology for grand and abstract theories. Examples range from older sociological theories, such as structural-functionalism, to newer contributions, such as standpoint, feminism, or Giddens’s structuration theory.

### Deductive and inductive approaches

* Methods are classified as deductive and inductive.
  + The method used depends on the nature of the research being conducted.
  + Deductive approaches begin with theory.
  + Inductive approaches begin with observations.

### Epistemological considerations

* Epistemology is what we can know and how we can come to know it. There are many debates concerning these questions. Three major approaches include:
  + Positivism
    - Facts must be tangible, or in other words, must be able to be seen or heard.
    - Science should proceed through the development of hypotheses and hypothesis-testing.
    - Science must be “value free.”
  + Interpretivism
    - This view focuses on subjective meanings of people’s actions.
    - Interpretivist researchers try to understand the social world from the point of view of actors.
    - It tries to create “empathetic understandings and interpretations of human behaviour.”
  + Critical Approaches to Social Science
    - Critical social scientists argue that the purpose of research is to rid the world of suffering; it is not value-free.
    - This view argues that research should be action-oriented.

### Ontological considerations

* Ontology is a study of how we exist. It determines how research questions are formulated and how the research is carried out.
* Ontology is categorized as:
  + Objectivism
    - There is a pre-existent social reality.
  + Constructionism
    - Social reality creates objects and relationships in specific ways. Such outcomes vary from society to society.

### General orientations: quantitative and qualitative research

* Quantitative methods
  + Uses numbers and statistics to collect and analyze data.
  + Usually entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research in which theory testing is a prime objective.
  + Incorporates the practices and norms of the natural science model and of positivism in particular.
  + Generally embodies a view of society as an external, objective reality.
* Qualitative methods
  + Relies on words and other non-numerical symbols.
  + Takes a predominantly inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the generation of theories and interpretations is the main goal.
  + Rejects the use of the natural science and positivist models in social research and replaces them with methodologies that seek to determine how individuals interpret their social world.
  + Embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting and emergent property of individuals’ creations.

### Influences on the conduct of social research

* The following is a list of things that influence how we conduct social research. Each addresses issues that arise in carrying out social research:
  + Values
  + Politics
  + Practical considerations
  + Ethical issues
    - Informed consent, deception, harm to participants, and invasion of privacy

### Research questions

* A good research question will:
  + be as clear as possible so that it will be understandable to others;
  + be researchable—it must allow for the development of a research design and the collection of data; this means that extremely abstract terms may not be suitable;
  + relate in some way to existing studies that suggest how your question may be approached. Even with a topic that has not been widely researched, there will probably be some relevant literature (for example, on related or parallel topics). Establishing connections with existing will help to show how your research can make a contribution, however small, to the existing knowledge on the topic.
  + be linked to the other research questions in the study, so that you can develop a single argument or at least a set of related arguments; this is hard to do with unrelated research questions;
  + be neither too broad (no research project can do justice to all aspects of a topic) nor too narrow (unable to make a meaningful contribution to an area of study).

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to

1. Explain the relationship between theory in the broad sense and data gathering; in particular, you should be able to recognize that the purpose of collecting data may be to *test* theories or to *create* theories.
2. Discuss the positivist, interpretivist, and critical approaches to social science, including their key assumptions regarding the purposes of social research and how it should be conducted.
3. Describe the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research.
4. Identify how different factors, including values, politics, and issues related to the research question(s) may influence social research.

## SUGGESTED CLASS ACTIVITIES

**1. Research Topics**

Divide students into small groups and ask each group to select a social phenomenon, human behaviour, or experience that they think is especially interesting or important to understand.

Then, ask the groups to come up with a research question or questions that could be used as a focal point for research (e.g., What causes eating disorders? What is it like to be a victim of domestic violence?). The students can pick any topic they like.

Each group then explains how they would *research* the topic they have chosen. They are to do that by answering the following questions, drawing on the knowledge they have gained in class and from reading this chapter:

1. Have your social or cultural values influenced your choice of subject matter? Explain.
2. Can your topic be researched scientifically? Explain. (Hint: Think of the different ways in which social researchers define “science.”)
3. How would a positivist, an interpretive researcher, and a critical social scientist conduct research on the topic you’ve chosen? Provide as much detail as possible.
4. Make up some results that researchers in each of the three approaches to science might produce. In other words, pretend that you did the research in each of the three ways and came up with some findings. You may have a different set of findings for each of the three approaches. Use your imagined findings to generate three answers to your research question(s), one for each of the three approaches to science.

Once those questions have been answered, each group will select a spokesperson to report their group’s work to the rest of the class. Those listening are to ask questions and offer a critique of the group’s presentation.

**2. The Role of the Researcher**

The class is divided into three groups in order to conduct a debate. The first group must make the case for position (a) below; the second group argues in favour of position (b); and the third group can choose either (a) or (b). Each group is given 20 minutes to prepare its case.

1. The social researcher’s most important duty is to *explain* the social world, not to change it. The search for practical applications such as positive social change is best left to other people because it may create political bias on the part of the researcher, such as when findings are ignored or rejected simply because they come from people who do not share the researcher’s political views.
2. The social researcher’s most important duty is to *make the world a better place* by ridding society of things such as racism, economic inequality, and sexism. Research that does not have positive social change as its primary goal is not worth doing.

After all groups have made their arguments, each one is allowed time for rebuttal. When that is finished, the class votes to decide which group made the strongest case.

**3. Theory Development: Theory and Research**

The goal of this activity is to provide a concrete and understandable sample of the process of theory development. The model is taken from Walter Wallace, *The Logic of Science in Sociology* (1971).

Present the Wallace model to students as follows:

Give students three examples of observations that colleagues of yours noted in their research. Have them discuss the observations in small groups, then discuss with the class as a whole.

Have the students set up these three examples in such a way as to demonstrate an inductive approach to social research and then a deductive approach to social research. Then, have them discuss how the two approaches differ. If they had to choose the approach for each of the research projects, would they choose to work inductively or deductively in each case? Why did they make the choices that they did? How do they think the approach might affect the results?

**4. Group Analysis of a Journal Article**

Prior to attending class, have students read: Kaliuzhna, M. (2020). [*Symmetries and asymmetries in the belief in a just world*](https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S019188692030129X). Personality and Individual Differences, 161, 109940. Then, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. Which research method is used in the article?
2. Is more than one research method used?
3. How much of the study is devoted to explaining the research methodology?
4. Do the authors try to generalize to other such cases or is this considered a unique study?
5. What sociological theory or theories are used in guiding this study?
6. Is there a good relationship between theory and method?
7. In your opinion how could this study have been improved? Explain.
8. How would this study differ if it utilized a different method (i.e., utilized quantitative methodology rather than qualitative methodology or vice versa)?
9. How might this study have been different if it were carried out by someone of the opposite sex? (Assuming there are not several authors of a different sex).
10. Give an overall evaluation of the value of this study.

**5. Group Analysis of a Research Project**

Watch [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olVHKgIBXc) on the Milgram experiment. Discuss the following questions with the class:

1. What was the purpose of Milgram’s experiment?
2. Why was Milgram interested in the question of whether or not people would follow the orders of a superior, even if they thought harm was being done to a person?
3. What did we learn about obedience from the Milgram experiment?
4. Why did Milgram’s experiment finish earlier than expected?
5. What criticisms have been made of Milgram’s experimental method?
6. What should Milgram have done differently?
7. What political ramifications with regard to war and soldiers come out of Milgram’s experiment?
8. How do the lessons learned from the Milgram experiment help us to design better research projects using human subjects?

## SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read [*Social Exclusion and Poverty: Translating Social Capital into Accessible Resources*](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2011.00792.x) by Boon, B., & Farnsworth, J. (2011). Write a three- to four-page paper outlining your thoughts on the political and practical issues raised by this research.
2. Consider some of the most important social problems that face our society. Choose one and explain why this social problem is important, and what it is about this topic that needs further research. In other words, what do you think we don’t know now, but need to know, to address this social problem?
3. Write a research questionthatmeets all the criteria for a good research question as laid out in Box 1.6 “Considerations when developing research questions” (p. 25). If possible, have two of your classmates examine your research question and suggest ways to improve it.
4. Choose an important social problem. Do you think that men would construct research questions about this topic differently than women? What about people from different ethnicities or religions? Would a poor person construct research questions about this topic differently from a rich person? Write a one-page summary of whether and how gender, race, religion, and class might affect the design of research projects.
5. The textbook argues that research is inherently political. Using the *Sociological Abstracts* database, find a sample research paper and read the paper’s abstract. Consider whether this paper is “political” and explain how you think this affects the reception of the research.

## SUGGESTED TEACHING AIDS

* Northey, M., Tepperman, L., & Albanese, P. (2015) *Making Sense in the Social Sciences: A Student’s Guide to Research and Writing*,6th ed. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
  + This text provides an easy-to-read overview of a general research and writing principles.
* Crull, S. R., & Collins, S. M. (2004), *[Adapting traditions: Teaching research methods in a large class setting](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3211462)*, Teaching Sociology, 32: 206–212.
  + This article provides an insight into how to integrate research paper exercises into classroom teaching.
* Raddon, M.-B., Nault, C., & Scott, A. (2008). [*Integrating the Complete Research Project into a Large Qualitative Methods Course*](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0092055X0803600204). Teaching Sociology, 36(2), 141–149.
  + This article reflects on approaches to and challenges inherent in incorporating holistic participatory research exercises into a post-secondary qualitative methods course.
* [Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology](https://trails.asanet.org/), American Sociological Association
  + The American Sociological Association puts together syllabi and related teaching materials. Additional material is integrated on an ongoing basis.
* [“Basic Research Designs,”](https://cirt.gcu.edu/research/developmentresources/tutorials/researchdesigns) Center for Innovation and Teaching
* [“11 Smart Sociology Research Topics That Will Get You an A,”](https://owlcation.com/social-sciences/Great-Sociology-Research-Topics) Brittany Kennedy for Owlcation
  + This website provides a listing of ten major areas of research within the discipline of sociology. Each major area features a short introduction and a list of research questions relating to the area.