The Nature of Social Research

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
The nature of social research

- There are many ways of knowing about the world
- Personal experience and common sense knowledge enable us to get things done in everyday life
- Personal experience and common sense knowledge cannot be reliably generalized
- Social research is empirical & probabilistic
  - Empirical research: research that operates from the ideological position that questions about human behavior can be answered only through controlled, systematic observations of the real world (p. 72)
  - Probabilistic: capable of identifying only those forces that have a high likelihood, but not a certainty, of influencing human action (p. 72)

Sociologist considers own behavior indicative of larger trends (from *The Onion*)

Boston—According to the findings of a paper published Monday in *The American Journal of Sociology*, the behaviors and experiences of Boston sociologist Dr. Steven Piers are indicative of a host of wider societal trends.

“My observations indicate that the typical married American man has had increasing difficulty relating to his spouse over the last two and a half years, ever since she starting taking those yoga classes,” wrote Piers, 56, in his *Interpersonal Connections Within The Marriage Paradigm: A Study in Causality*.

In the paper, Piers asserted that the most pressing issue for American men is maintaining healthy sexual relations with their wives.

“Back in 1999, American men’s frustration derived mostly from the infrequency of sex,” the paper read. “Recently, however, that trend has shifted as husbands report a decreasing interest in intimacy, particularly if there is a Celtics game or a new *NYPD Blue* on TV. While many men cite increased job responsibilities and stress as possible catalysts, many more blame the affair their wives had with some textile salesman during a training conference in Seattle.”

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Theory: a set of statements or propositions that seeks to explain or predict a particular aspect of life (p. 72)

- Theory guides research, i.e., helps us develop hypotheses
- Hypothesis: researchable prediction that specifies the relationship between two or more variables (p. 72)
- Research tests and develops theory

Theory simplifies!

- It tells us what to pay attention to and what can be ignored

A hypothetical example

✓ Theory 1: Abstract social knowledge leads to greater interactional skill in primary and secondary groups
✓ Hypothesis 1: Taking Soc 134 leads to greater popularity on campus
✓ IV = enrollment in Soc 134, DVs = number of friends, dates
✓ Research: Soc 134 students have more dates, but not more friends
✓ Theory 2: Abstract social knowledge leads to greater interactional skill in romantic relationships
✓ Hypothesis 2: Soc 134 students will have greater success in attracting and keeping dating partners
✓ IV = enrollment in Soc 134, DVs = # of dating partners, length of relationships
✓ Research: Soc 134 students don’t have any greater success in attracting dating partners, but their relationships last longer
✓ Theory 3: Abstract social knowledge leads to greater interactional skill in long-term romantic relationships
✓ Practical conclusion: Taking Soc 134 is the path to true love
Who does well in Soc 134? A theory?

Class/race → Quality of high school → Final grade → TV habits → Roommate situation

Parents’ education → High school study habits → Studying time → Sleep time → Personality

Health → Health habits → Note-taking → Social life → Appearance

Diet → Diet habits → Time management skills → Alarm clock quality → Gender

Test-taking skills → Time management skills → Attendance → Alcohol use → Guilt

Ownership of No.2 pencils → Competing events at 11 a.m. → Transportation → Religious beliefs
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- Ownership of No.2 pencils
- Competing events at 11 a.m.
Evaluating social research

✔ Is the sampling (p. 78) representative?
✔ Are the indicators (p. 79) appropriate?
  • Indicator: measurable event, characteristic, or behavior commonly thought to reflect a particular concept
✔ How do the researchers’ values & interests (p. 80) affect the results?
✔ Is the right method (e.g., experiment, field research, survey, unobtrusive research) used?
✔ Do the researchers’ claims follow from their research results?
Some journalistic research

✔ Newsweek cover story: “No Sex, Please, We’re Married.” (June 30, 2003)
  • Implication of article: “Lately, it seems, we’re just not in the mood.” Married people are too tired and busy to have sex.
  • Evidence: “It’s difficult to say exactly how many of the 113 million married Americans are too exhausted or too grumpy to get it on, but some psychologists estimate that 15 to 20 percent of couples have sex no more than 10 times a year, which is how experts define sexless marriage. And even couples who don’t meet that definition still feel like they’re not having sex as often as they used to.”

✔ Newsweek cover story: “This Could Be Your Kid” (Aug. 11, 2003)
  • Implication: “Teen prostitution is flourishing nationwide. The girls are younger, the trade is more violent—and, increasingly, the teenagers come from middle-class homes.”
  • Evidence: “Stacey’s story is enough to make any parent sick with worry. Sadly, her experience is growing more common. Over the last year, local and federal law-enforcement officials say they have noted a marked increase in teen prostitution in cities across the country. Solid numbers are difficult to come by—a government-sponsored study puts the figure in the hundreds of thousands—but law-enforcement agencies and advocacy groups that work with teen prostitutes say they are increasingly alarmed by the trend lines: the kids are getting younger; according to the FBI, the average age of a new recruit is just 13; some are as young as 9. The girls—many fewer are boys, most experts believe—are subjected to more violence from pimps. And, while the vast majority of teen prostitutes today are runaways, illegal immigrants and children of poor urban areas, experts say a growing number now come from middle-class homes.”