The Nature of Social Research
Jan. 31, 2005

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 started 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.”

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
- N = 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
- N = 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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class rank</th>
<th>Quality of high school</th>
<th>Time management skills</th>
<th>TV habits</th>
<th>Alarm clock quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ education</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Final grade</td>
<td>Note-taking</td>
<td>Social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school study habits</td>
<td>Exam</td>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Personality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class notes</td>
<td>Test-taking skills</td>
<td>Drinking</td>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownership of No.2 pencils</td>
<td>Competing events at 11 a.m.</td>
<td>ред</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Who does well in Soc 134? A theory!

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: "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 tired and busy to have sex, but some psychologists estimate that 15 to 30 percent of married couples have sex once a week at best. "
  - 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: "They've started to come out of the woodwork. They're even young enough to be my patients."
  - Evidence: "Most girls, even now, don't fit the classic case of entertainment prostitution. They're not young enough to be sold in the sex trade."

- Evidence: "Girls are increasingly alarmed by the trend; some are getting younger. According to the FBI, the average age of a new recruit is just 10 years old. 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."