

What do you think?

In the following letter published in a college newspaper, the Provost objects to data that had been previously reported.

Provost says percentage was wrong

I am writing to clarify a misstatement in an editorial in the April 19 The Panther. As recently as last fall, the concept behind this statement was presented to your staff.

This current use of erroneous numbers demands correction.

The figure used in the statement, "With about 52 percent of the faculty being part-time..." is absolutely incorrect.

Since the thrust of the editorial is Chapman's ability to live up to its desire to "nurture and help develop students," a proper measure of the difference between full-time faculty presence and that of part-time faculty is how many credits or courses are taught.

For the past four years, full-time faculty have taught about 70 percent of the credits in which students enroll each semester.

Thus, a large majority of our faculty are here full-time: teaching classes, advising students, attending meetings, interacting with students in the hallways and dining rooms.

Once again, I welcome the opportunity to present the truth.

Might I suggest that a future edition of The Panther be devoted to the contributions of part-time faculty.

Harry L. Hamilton, Provost

Sometimes, data seem as though they dropped out of the sky, making no sense. Which side is correct in this case: the original newspaper report or the Provost's account? Or are both sides correct? If so, why?

See the *What do you think? ... Revisited* box toward the end of the chapter.



Earl Babbie

you read through Part 2, the interrelationships among parts will become clearer.

We'll start by briefly examining the main purposes of social research, learning about both idiographic and nomothetic approaches. Then, we'll consider units of analysis—the "what or whom" you want to study. Next we'll consider alternative ways of handling time in social research, or how to study a moving target that changes over time.

With these ideas in hand, we'll turn to how to design a research project. This overview of the research process serves two purposes: In addition to describing how you might go about designing a study, it provides a map of the remainder of this book.

Next, we'll look at the elements of a research proposal. Often you'll need to detail your intentions before you actually conduct your research in order to obtain funding for a major project or perhaps to get your instructor's approval for a class project. You'll see that

the research proposal provides an excellent opportunity for you to consider all aspects of your research in advance. Also, this section should help you with the continuing, end-of-chapter exercise concerning research proposals, in the event that you are doing that.

Finally, we'll consider the ethical implications of this research design. As you read through this chapter, think about how the practice of social research in this regard can raise larger issues.

Three Purposes of Research

Social research can serve many purposes. Three of the most common and useful purposes are exploration, description, and explanation. Although most studies have more than one of these purposes, examining them separately is useful because each has different implications for other aspects of research design.

Exploration

Much of social research is conducted to explore a topic, that is, to start to familiarize a researcher with that topic. This approach typically occurs when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new.

As an example, let's suppose that widespread taxpayer dissatisfaction with the government erupts into a taxpayers' revolt. People begin refusing to pay their taxes, and they organize themselves around that issue. You might like to learn more about the movement: How widespread is it? What levels and degrees of support exist within the community? How is the movement organized? What kinds of people are active in it? An exploratory study could help you find at least approximate answers to some of these questions. You might check figures with tax-collecting officials, gather and study the literature of the movement, attend meetings, and interview leaders.

Exploratory studies are also appropriate for more-persistent phenomena. Suppose you're unhappy with your college's graduation requirements and want to help change them. You might study the history of such requirements at the college and meet with college officials to learn the reasons for the current standards. You could talk to several students to get a rough idea of their sentiments on the subject. Although this last activity would not necessarily yield an accurate picture of student opinion, it could suggest what the results of a more extensive study might be.

Sometimes exploratory research is pursued through the use of focus groups, or guided small-group discussions. This technique is frequently used in market research, which we'll examine further in Chapter 10.

Exploratory studies are most typically done for three purposes: (1) to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding, (2) to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study, and (3) to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent study.

Exploratory studies are quite valuable in social science research. They're essential whenever a researcher is breaking new ground, and they almost always yield new insights into a topic for research. Exploratory studies are also a source of grounded theory, as discussed in Chapter 10.

The chief shortcoming of exploratory studies is that they seldom provide satisfactory answers to research questions, although they can hint at the answers and can suggest which research methods could provide definitive answers. The reason exploratory studies are seldom definitive in themselves has to do with representativeness; that is, the people you study in your exploratory research may not be typical of the larger population that interests you. Once you understand representativeness, you'll be able to know whether a given exploratory study actually answered its research problem or only pointed the way toward an answer. (Representativeness is discussed at length in Chapter 7.)

Description

Many social science studies aim at describing situations and events. The researcher observes and then describes what was observed. Because scientific observation is careful and deliberate, scientific descriptions are typically more accurate and precise than are casual ones.

For example, the goal of the U.S. Census is to describe accurately and precisely a wide variety of the population characteristics of the United States, as well as areas such as states and counties. Other examples of descriptive studies include the creation of age-gender profiles of populations by demographers, the computation of crime rates for different cities, and a product-marketing survey that describes the people who use, or would use, a particular product.



Earl Babbie

Research design involves the creation and integration of many diverse elements.

Many qualitative studies aim primarily at description. An anthropological ethnography, for example, may try to detail the particular culture of some preliterate society. At the same time, such studies are seldom limited to a merely descriptive purpose. Researchers usually go on to examine why the observed patterns exist and what they imply.

Explanation

The third general purpose of social science research is to explain things. Descriptive studies answer questions of what, where, when, and how; explanatory studies address questions of why. So when William Sanders (1994) set about describing the varieties of gang violence, he also wanted to reconstruct the process that brought about violent episodes among the gangs of different ethnic groups.

Reporting the voting intentions of an electorate is descriptive, but reporting why some people plan to vote for Candidate A and others for Candidate B is explanatory. Reporting why some cities have higher crime rates than others involves explanation, as does identifying *variables* that explain why some cities have higher crime rates than others.

Let's look at a specific case. Recent years have seen a radical shift in American attitudes toward marijuana. Support for the use of medical marijuana has increased in many states and, at this writing, recreational use of marijuana is legal in Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Oregon, California, Nevada, Michigan, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine. What factors do you suppose might shape people's attitudes toward the legalization of marijuana? To answer this, you might first consider whether men and women differ in their opinions. An explanatory analysis of the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS) data indicates that 65 percent of men and 56 percent of women said that marijuana should be legalized.

What about political orientation? The GSS data show that 74 percent of liberals said marijuana should be legalized, as compared with 54 percent of moderates and 42 percent of conservatives. Further, 62 percent of Democrats, as compared with 57 percent of Independents and 42 percent of Republicans, supported such legalization.

Given these statistics, you might begin to develop an explanation for attitudes toward marijuana legalization. Further study of gender and political orientation might then lead to a deeper explanation of these attitudes.

In Chapter 1, we noted that there were two different approaches to explanation in social research (and in everyday life). Let's return to those now.

In the remainder of this chapter, we'll examine some general approaches to research and the elements of research design from which you can choose. As you do this, keep in mind that the advanced planning for research may not fit perfectly the situations you will confront in the field. The "How to Do It: Putting Social Research to Work" reports on a graduate student's experience in the field.

Idiographic Explanation

As you will recall from Chapter 1, idiographic explanation seeks an exhaustive understanding of the causes producing events and situations in a single or limited number of cases. If you wished to understand why a student protest broke out on a particular college campus, you would seek to root out everything that contributed to that result. You would consider the history of the college, its organizational structure, the nature of the student body, the actions of influential individuals (administrators, faculty, students, others), the context of student activities nationally, triggering events (e.g., shutting down a student organization, arresting a student), and so forth. You'll know your analysis is complete when the explanatory factors you have assembled made the protest inevitable, and when the absence of any of those factors might have kept it from happening.

There is no statistical test that can tell you when you have achieved this analytical success, however. This conclusion rests on the "art" of social research, which is achieved primarily through experience: by reading the analyses of others and by conducting your own. Here are a few techniques to consider.

- *Pay attention to the explanations offered by the people living the social processes you are studying.* It is important that you not believe everything

How to Do It

Putting Social Research to Work

Jacob Perry is a graduate student at the Clinton School of Public Service in Little Rock, Arkansas, and he chose to do his semester of field-work abroad in North Africa. He quickly discovered that the research techniques he had mastered in his studies did not necessarily fit into the research situation. Here's how he described it:

We Americans have our quite fixed ideas about what research is: intense preparation, thorough literature review, ample discussions to outline details, timeline of events to take place, schedule of responsibilities and activities to perform, etc. These simply must happen in order to perform reputable research. And everything must be agreed upon before the research begins. That is the American way (granted, it is also somewhat of an internationally accepted way as well) and it is in many ways a reflection of our organized, prompt, accountable, obligation and time-oriented culture. However, I am in Morocco performing a research project, and Moroccan culture has quite different views on time, responsibilities, and planning. Time here is neither rigid nor fixed. It is not linear but rather cyclical, meaning time is not lost—it is simply recovered later. Life is now; it is present; it is mostly unplanned.

Jacob found ways to develop rapport with his fellow researchers in order to put his research training to good use.

I spent the first two weeks building trust, familiarity, comfort—relations! This has been vital to the project's progress, as our team is able to discuss openly, honestly, and sometimes aggressively to arrive at an agreement. I also speak the local language, which has allowed my Moroccan partners to remain in their linguistic comfort zone, remain in control of conversations concerning project work, and not feel they are being neo-colonized by a foreigner here to "save" their country.

Ultimately, Jacob felt the project had been successful, and it is obvious that it was a powerful learning experience for the young social researcher.

I am so pleased with this project in Morocco because it is a partnership between myself and Moroccans who have already established the goals, needs, and approach to developing their society. This project depends entirely on local expertise and initiative. I am here because of a mutually expressed interest by myself and locals who want to improve their city. And the project has progressed because of continuous discussions in which all team members offer their perspectives. In short, learning, considering, and respecting local culture is necessary for international development work to be successful, and I am seeing a great example of effective development work on the ground in Morocco.

Source: Private communication June 24, 2013.

you are told, of course, but don't make the opposite mistake of thinking you understand the situation better than those living there. (Social researchers have sometimes been accused of a certain degree of arrogance in this respect.) If there is wide agreement as to the importance of a certain factor, that should increase your confidence that it was a cause of the event under study. This would be more so if participants with very different points of view agree on that point. In the case of the student protest, administrators and students are likely to have very different opinions about what happened, but if they all agree that the arrest of a student activist was a triggering event, then it probably was an important cause.

- *Comparisons with similar situations, either in different places or at different times in the same place, can be insightful.* Perhaps the campus in question has had previous protests, or perhaps there was a time when a protest almost

occurred but didn't. Knowledge of such instances can provide useful comparisons and contrasts to the case under study. Similarly, protests or nonprotests at other campuses can offer useful comparisons.

The Logic of Nomothetic Explanation

The preceding examination of what factors might cause attitudes about legalizing marijuana illustrates nomothetic explanation, as discussed in Chapter 1. Recall that in this model, we try to find a few factors (independent variables) that can account for much of the variation in a given phenomenon. This explanatory model stands in contrast to the idiographic model, in which we seek a complete, in-depth understanding of a single case.