



APPLYING SOCIOLOGY

Using Sociological Methods

As you learned in this chapter, sociologists study how people interact with one another and with their social environment. There are four broad categories of research methods that sociologists employ to collect **data**, or scientific information, on society and human behavior. These categories are surveys, experiments, observational studies, and the analysis of existing sources. Under these broad headings fall a series of more specific research techniques, such as the historical method or content analysis. Sociologists also employ various techniques to analyze their data once the collection process is completed. The most common of these techniques involve some form of statistical analysis.

Following is a brief description of some of the methods employed in social research. A more detailed discussion of sociological research **methods** can be found in the Appendix, which begins on page 485. The information presented in the Appendix will be helpful for your understanding of the science of sociology.



The Historical Method

The historical method is one of the techniques used to analyze existing sources. It involves examining any materials from the past that contain information of sociological interest. These materials can include such things as toys, clothes, pictures, tools, or furniture. More often, however, they consist of written documents, such as diaries, newspapers, magazines, government records, laws, and letters.

The historical method enables researchers to learn about events that happened in the recent past or long ago. It also provides a way to study trends. In the case of personal material, such as letters and diaries, the historical method allows researchers to view the private, unguarded feelings of individuals who lived at another point in time.



Content Analysis

Content analysis is another technique used to analyze existing sources. The process involves counting the number of times a particular word, phrase, idea, event, symbol, or other element appears in a given context. Content analysis can be used to analyze any form of recorded communication. Common sources of information include television, radio, sound recordings, movies, photographs, art work, newspapers, magazines, books, and personal or government documents.

Content analysis is a popular research technique because it is easy to use and inexpensive. Researchers merely have to count the number of times the characteristics of interest appear in the source. In recent years, computer programs have further simplified the evaluation of data collected through content analysis.



The Survey Method

The survey method allows sociologists to collect data on attitudes and opinions from large numbers of people.

Two techniques are commonly used to gather survey data—questionnaires and interviews.

A questionnaire is a list of questions or statements to which people are asked to respond in writing. Questionnaires can be administered in person or sent through the mail. This technique has the advantage of making it possible to collect information from a large number of people in a relatively short period of time. Questionnaires, however, also have several disadvantages. They do not, for example, enable sociologists to know if the respondents have interpreted the questions correctly. Furthermore, researchers must rely solely on survey answers in drawing conclusions.

An interview is much like a questionnaire, except that respondents are asked to respond orally to questions. Interviews can be administered in person or over the telephone. This technique has the advantage of making it easier for researchers

to determine whether respondents understand the questions. It also makes it possible for researchers to ask for clarifications and to note various context clues, such as facial expressions, hesitations, or side comments. One disadvantage of using interviews is that they are much more time consuming and expensive to administer than are questionnaires.



Observation

In observational studies, researchers observe the behavior of individuals in actual social settings. Data can be collected through either detached observation or participant observation.

In detached observation, researchers observe the situation under study from a distance. Because researchers do not participate in the situation being studied, individuals often do not realize that they are being observed. This has the advantage of making it less likely that behavior will be affected by the known presence of a researcher. Detached observation, however, is not always an effective technique. By remaining outside of the situation being studied, social researchers sometimes miss important details.

A more accurate picture of a situation often can be achieved through participant observation. In participant observation, researchers become directly involved in the situation under investigation. Sometimes researchers make their identities known to the people being studied. At other times, researchers remain anonymous. The latter technique has the advantage of increasing the chances that the subjects of the study will act naturally.



The Case Study

A case study is an intensive analysis of a person, group, event, or problem.

Although case studies tend to rely heavily on observational techniques, researchers often use survey methods and the analysis of existing source material in their investigations. Thus

it is not so much the technique that distinguishes case studies, but rather the intense focus of the investigation.

Case studies are particularly useful in analyzing infrequent or temporary events such as riots or natural disasters. Like observational studies, case studies have the advantage of providing an in-depth picture of a real-life situation. Researchers must be careful, however, not to generalize on the basis of one case.



Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis involves the use of mathematical data. Provided the data can be translated into numbers, statistical analysis can be used with any of the research methods we have discussed. Statistical analysis involves analyzing data that have already been collected to determine the strength of the relationship that may exist between two or more variables. A **variable** is a characteristic that can differ from one individual, group, or situation to another in a measurable way. Examples of variables include income, age, and level of education.

In the computer age, statistical analysis has become the preferred method for interpreting data. The computer allows large amounts of information to be processed in a relatively short amount of time. Many statistical packages are available to assist sociologists in analyzing their data. Sociology, like many of the social sciences, is becoming increasingly dependent on the use of statistics.

The methods described above are only some of the research methods used by sociologists to collect and evaluate data. It is important to note that sociologists often will use more than one method in the research process. In the remainder of the Applying Sociology features, you will have a chance to put these methods to work analyzing information of interest to sociologists. Thus you will have an opportunity not only to read about sociology but also to sharpen your sociological skills.