

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

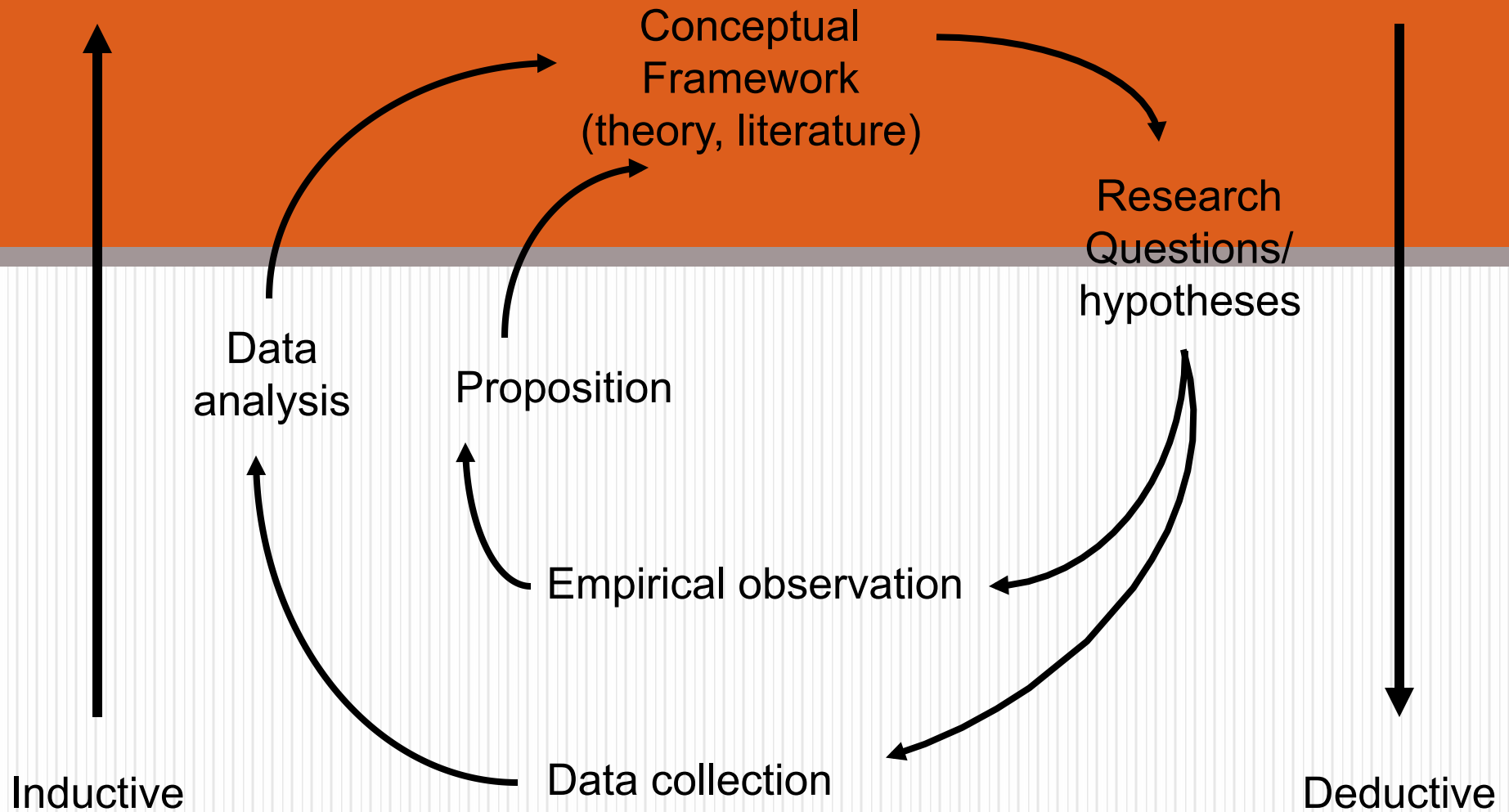
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Social Research

Social research is the purposive and rigorous investigation that aims to generate new knowledge. It is the intellectual tool of social scientists, which allows them to enter contexts of personal and/or public interest that are unknown to them, and to search for answers to their questions. Social research is about discovery, expanding the horizons of the known, confidence, new ideas and new conclusions about all aspects of life.

(Sarantakos, S. (2005) *Social Research*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.4)

THE RESEARCH PROCESS



Social Research in Practice

Research Families

- Quantitative or qualitative.
- Deskwork or fieldwork.

Research Approaches

- Action research..
- Experiments.
- Surveys

Research Techniques

- Documents.
- Interviews.
- Observation.
- Questionnaires.
- Focus Groups**

Decisions about Information-gathering Techniques

1. Variety of techniques available, depending on:
 - i. WHAT information is required (e.g., quantitative or qualitative).
 - ii. WHO has the information (e.g., access and reliability).
 - iii. WHY you need the information (e.g., statistically measurement or indepth understanding).
 - iv. WHEN AND HOW MUCH you need the information (e.g., budget, timing).

2. Most techniques complement and support each other. No one technique duplicates exactly the same information.

3. Using as many techniques as possible is known as ‘triangulation’, which means examining the same data through different strategies.

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

QUANTITATIVE

- Data in form of numbers.
- Explanation/ analysis through numbers.
- Objective.
- Relatively large-scale surveys.
- Representative samples.
- Focus on gathering of 'facts'.
- Predefined variables and measurement.
- Data collection before analysis.
- Cause and effect relationships

QUALITATIVE

- Non-numeric data (usually).
- Explanation through words.
- Subjective.
- Focus on exploring, in some detail, of small samples.
- Aims to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth'.
- Inductive reasoning.
- Creativity.
- Data collection and analysis intertwined.
- Assumes dynamic reality.

Survey Research

Survey research is the *method of collecting information* by asking a set of preformulated *questions* in a predetermined sequence in a structured questionnaire to a *sample* of individuals drawn so as to be representative of a defined *population*'

(Hutton 1990, quoted in Blaxter et al 2001).

Qualitative Research

- The purpose of qualitative research is to assess the minds of people to discover their impressions, expectations and prejudices.
- It does not provide statistical answers. Rather it provides 'soft data'.
 - Generate ideas on branding, new ideas, design issues etc.
 - Examination of advertising strategy, pre-testing. What type of advertisement is most appealing.
 - Exploring the decision-making process. Why do people buy something or go to Mass?
 - Exploratory study before quantitative research. It can capture the basic feel of a problem prior to conducting a more analytical study.
 - After a quantitative study to add depth to issues.
- Impression sometimes given that qualitative is 'less than' quantitative but not so, just different.

In-depth Interviews

- A personal interview is a two-way conversation on a given topic between a respondent. It is a '*conversation with a purpose*'. An 'in-depth interview' is a personal interview where a trained interviewer interacts with an individual subject to get him/her to freely express his/her thoughts on the subject of interest.
- An in-depth interview is:
 - Used to obtain detailed insights and personal thoughts.
 - Flexible and unstructured, but usually with an interview guide.
 - A purpose, to probe informants' motivations, feelings, beliefs.
 - Lasts about 1 hour.
 - Interviewer creates relaxed, open environment.
 - Wording of questions and order are determined by flow of conversation.
 - Interview transcripts are analysed for themes and connections between themes.

Focus Group

The focus group is an interview style designed for small groups. Usually guided discussion addressing a particular topic. It is used to learn through discussion about conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious group characteristics.

The focus group is a discussion-based interview that produces a particular type of qualitative data. It involves the simultaneous use of multiple respondents to generate data and it is the 'focused' (that is, on an external stimulus and relatively staged (that is, by a moderator) nature of the focus group method that separates it from other types of group interviewing strategy', Millward in Breakwell et al (1995).

'In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from a group discussion' (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Focus Groups

- A focus group consists of 8-10 participants who are led by a moderator in an in-depth discussion on a particular topic or concept.
 - Purpose is to gain insights by listening to a group of people from the appropriate target market
 - Select participants with similar backgrounds or experiences.
 - Learn and understand what participants have to say and why.
 - Identify key issues.

The Stages of a focus group

1. Planning

Know what you want to ask (Topic Guide).

Recruitment – know who you want to ask.

2. Introduction

Moderator establishes rapport with participants.

Participants are invited to introduce themselves.

Rules of the group are explained.

Objectives of research are outlined (sometimes in stages).

3. Discussion

Moderator provokes intensive discussion in the relevant areas on the topic guide/ checklist.

4. Analysis

The group's responses are summarised at the end of the discussion.

5. Now what?

What will you do with the information now that you have it?

Statement of Basic Rules

Not a list of rigid rules but important to establish ground rules around the interactions during the group.

You expect an **open, polite**, and orderly environment where everyone in the group will be encouraged to participate. What happens if people talk too much or too little.

They need to know **what to expect** e.g., questions to individuals or group only; breaks, when finished, incentives, follow-up

People may have different opinions – important to **hear all opinions**.

Explain reason for **recording devices** and why camera not in room, who is viewing, what will happen to results etc.

Recruiting Participants

- Develop a participant profile – who do you want to attend groups?
- Homogenous in terms of demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Adequate experience of the issue being discussed.
- Small rewards or inducements.
- May need to over-recruit due to ‘no-shows’
- Avoid ‘professional’ participants.

Focus Group Size & Setting

- Typically 8-10 participants
- 1-3 hours long, usually 1.5 hrs
- May need to conduct several groups.

- Setting should be relaxed & informal
 - Videoconferencing
 - Circular seating arrangement
 - Microphones in unobtrusive locations

Group Composition

- **Key aspects to consider in recruiting groups are:**
 - The Socio-Economic Mix (ABC1, DE, F)
 - The Age profile
 - Sex
 - The mix of characteristics required for the project
- **Socio-economic Mix:**
 - Generally split groups rigidly across socio-economic lines
 - The values and aspirations of middle classes are often very different from working classes.
 - Education and levels of articulation differ.
 - More likely to be uncomfortable in each other's presence.

Group Composition (Contin.-)

Age Profile:

- Keep people of the same lifestyle together.
- Younger people pass through many lifestages quite rapidly. Therefore the age breaks need to be very tight.
- For teenagers, the age breaks need to be approximately two years, while post 30 years, the age breaks can be up to 10 years.

Gender:

- Keep teenage groups single sex – less impact from hormones or the need to preserve one's self-image.
- Mixed gender groups usually ideal for 25+ years but depends on the topic.

Group Composition

Behaviour/ Life-style:

- Ensure people 'fit' the requirements of the study e.g., if investigating religious behaviour, attitudes etc. of committed and less committed Catholics, the group(s) must include both categories.
- Consider implications of including both categories in same group or separately.

Selecting the Moderator

- Key figure in the Focus Group is the interviewer/moderator
 - ‘the moderator is a critical factor influencing the effectiveness and usefulness of the FG’
 - Sensitive to feelings and comments of participants
 - Firmness necessary to direct the group
 - Maintain high degree of interaction among participants
 - Maintain group dynamic
 - Ask the correct ‘probing’ questions
 - Draw responses from all participants.
- Moderators need to have good interpersonal and communication skills and a knowledge of the topic at hand

Moderator Discussion Guide

- Introduction: welcome, purpose & guidelines
- Warm-up: set the tone and set participants at ease
- Clarification of terms: provide definitions of key terms
- Easy & non-threatening questions: initial questions should be general & not intimidating or difficult.
- More difficult questions should be asked toward the middle & the end of the focus group after the participants feel more comfortable.
- Wrap-up: identify major themes from participants responses.
- Member check: determine how each member perceives selected issues.
- Closing statements: answer remaining questions & express thanks.

Focus Group – Advantages

- Everyone is in the same boat – can be less intimidating than personal interview.
- Good vehicle for creativity and stimulation from listening to others in the groups – one person's feelings or experiences can spark off another's.
- Observation of groups possible.
- Facilitates gathering together of people normally difficult to reach e.g., homeless, people living in hostels.
- It can produce speedy results.
- Spontaneity: responses are spontaneous
- Serendipity
- Structure: flexibility in topic & depth

Focus Group – Disadvantages

- People encouraged to 'exaggerate' by group dynamics.
- Loss of sense of perspective through 'hot-housing' discussion.
- The group may react negatively to the moderator, topic etc and 'freeze'.
- A strong personality (or perceived expert) may overawe others, leading them to withdraw or simply agree.
- Minority viewpoints may be lost by group members' feeling insecure at voicing opinions that appear different from the majority.
- Less depth of information than one-to-one interviewing.
- No context to study.
- Participants may not be representative of the desired population.
- Small sample size, limitations extrapolating to the population.
- Quality of results depends on skills of moderator
- Subjectivity of the results
- Coding, analysis & interpretation difficult.
- Results are exploratory NOT conclusive.

Group Confidentiality

In one sense, confidentiality issues similar to other research situations but also quite different.

What happens if focus group conducted amongst a group of people with eating disorder. The possibility of a group member talking to others outside the group is very real.

Confidentiality agreement – enforcement more an issue of honour than law.

Eight Basic Ingredients in Focus Groups

1. **A Clearly defined objective and/or research problem:** Is the focus group part of several other means of collecting data or a stand-alone data-collection technique? Do you have a clear understanding of the questions that need to be asked to address your research problem?
2. **The Nature of the Group:** How appropriate for the topic under discussion (Do they qualify?)
3. **Atmosphere and Rapport:** The moderator must make everyone feel comfortable talking openly in the group.
4. **An Aware listening facilitator:** Be prepared to deviate from planned guide to pursue interesting discussions spontaneously raised (but not too far).

Eight Basic Ingredients in Focus Groups

5. **A well-organised and prepared facilitator:** Know what questions you want to ask, what information you require and have a clear idea of the overall flow of the group (Start, middle and end).
6. **Structure and direction but restrained contribution to the discussion** – the ideal is 90% participants and 10% researcher.
7. **Research assistance** – advantages in having an observer to write notes on group dynamic; video tape also useful. Some recording essential.
8. **Systematic Analysis:** conducted in a way that is clearly verifiable and would permit another researcher arrive at the same conclusions using the same data. Keep notes and summaries during groups.