Thompson & Whitworth

SociologicalYOU

INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY

# Chapter 2 Expanded Key Terms

**American Sociological Association (ASA):** a national organization for sociologists dedicated to advancing sociology as a scientific discipline and profession serving the public good. (LO 2.1.2)

The ASA is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., and was established in 1905. Over 19,000 members of the ASA, and 6,000 typically attend the annual meeting. The ASA publishes 9 professional journals and magazines.

**Anonymity:** concealing the identities of participants within the research project (LO 2.1.2)

Anonymity is a requirement of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and is designed to protect the participant. When completing a survey or interview, the participant uses a code or records no personal identifying information. The research does not know the specific person who completed the survey or interview. Participants will often not be forthright and divulge personal information unless complete anonymity is provided.

**Case Study:** an in-depth analysis of a particular person, place, or event over a significant period (LO 2.4.1)

A case study is a report based on a far-reaching investigation into a subject of interest. Case studies typically use qualitative research tools such as interviews, observations, and texts and are very detailed.

**Code of Ethics:** a set of guidelines of appropriate behavior established by an organization for its members to follow (LO 2.3.2)

For sociology, the American Sociological Association (ASA) has outlined a code of ethics that sociologists can follow to help guide their behavior and maintain responsibility for themselves and their research subjects. The ASA guidelines include Professional Competence, Integrity, Professional and Scientific Behavior, Respect for People's Rights, Dignity and Diversity, and Social Responsibility.

**Confidentiality:** guarding who has the right of access to the data provided by the participants (LO 2.1.2)

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) requires all data to remain confidential, and a research proposal must indicate how the data will be safeguarded. Some researchers collect sensitive personal data that could harm the participants if the information is disseminated to the public or even within an institution. Therefore, the data must be locked in a filing cabinet or password protected if digitally stored. Often, the research proposal will indicate that the data will be destroyed in a specific number of years and how it will be destroyed.

**Content Analysis:** a systematic method of assigning codes to text, video, music, and other media to analyze and infer patterns (LO 2.2.2)

This research method provides insight into language, symbols, and patterns by examining content such as photos, television programming, and music. For example, a content analysis could compare the themes within the top 100 country songs and the top 100 rap songs for 2015. An analysis of the themes would provide an interesting examination of U.S. pop culture and the musical tastes of Americans. A benefit of this method is that it is inexpensive and does not involve human subjects. The disadvantages are that the coding process is subjective and requires trained and skilled researchers.

**Control Group:** the study subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable and are used as a reference group (LO 2.2.1)

This group does not receive the potential benefit of treatment, and this is one disadvantage to the method, especially when the experiment pertains to behavior modification or health issues. Both groups are administered a pretest and post-test to determine if the experimental groups benefit from the exposure factor. The control group does not have to change their attitudes or behaviors, which is an advantage as there are normally no issues concerning harm or discomfort by participating in the study.

**Debriefing:** a follow-up review of the research (LO 2.3.2)

A debriefing occurs after a research project is complete when the researcher discusses the study with the subjects. Debriefing involves providing the research subjects with detailed information about the study and its findings and answering their questions.

**Dependent Variable:** a factor that is changed by another variable (LO 2.1.2)

This variable is impacted by or responds to the independent variables and is what is being measured in the study. Poverty is a dependent variable that is being studied to determine how it is impacted by independent variables such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education.

**Ethics:** principles of conduct about how you are supposed to behave in a given situation (LO 2.3.2)

Ethics govern our perception of right or wrong and good or bad. Ethics often vary by time, place, and culture, with something being considered ethical in one time period or place but unethical in another. Within a given society, a general consensus exists about ethics and how people should behave in various situations.

**Ethnography:** descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system derived from the researcher being embedded over time within a group, organization, or community (LO 2.2.2)

This research method is most common within anthropology but is also used by sociologists. The method requires a strong commitment by the researcher to join a group or organization and conduct fieldwork over a long period, often weeks, months, or years. The results of this method can be extremely revealing due to the length of time of the study. The drawbacks are the time commitment and the potential for losing objectivity due to being part of the social system.

**Experiment:** the use of two or more groups in which one group is exposed to a factor being examined (LO 2.2.1)

Experiments use an experimental group and a control group. The control group is not exposed to the factor, while the experimental group is exposed to a factor, such as violence in the media. A pretest and post-test are administered to both groups to determine whether attitudes and behaviors change. This research method is more common in psychology and medical research but is used by sociologists, particularly when studying media and opinions.

**Experimental Group:** the study subjects exposed to the independent variable (LO 2.2.1)

This group experiences the factor being hypothesized as affecting the dependent variable. For example, if studying unemployment, the experimental group would attend a workshop on how to dress for interviews and receive clothes to wear to the interview. The control group would not attend the workshop or receive clothes. The researchers would compare the percentages of job applicants receiving job offers from both groups.

**Focus Group:** a small group interview or guided discussion using a moderator to gain insight into the participants' opinions on specific topics (LO 2.2.2)

Robert Merton created the first focus groups. The research method is commonly used within corporations and organizations to gain feedback on issues such as customer service, organizational behavior, and product and market research. Within sociology, it can gather feedback on such issues as the social setting within nursing homes, status symbols, and stereotypes and prejudices.

**General Social Survey (GSS):** a national survey on contemporary American society to monitor and explain trends and contrasts in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes (LO 2.2.4)

Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the GSS is a national survey designed to give its users an unbiased analysis of societal change and what Americans feel about various issues. The GSS has existed since 1972 and is used by over 400,000 students, scholars, policymakers, and politicians annually.

**Groupthink:** the tendency of group members to yield to the desire for consensus rather than expressing individual or alternative ideas (LO 2.2.2)

This term was developed by the social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972 in his book *Victims of Groupthink*. This phenomenon can occur among focus group members and is considered a drawback of that research method. Members may go along with the other group members to maintain harmony and conformity. In extreme cases, the decisions by the group members within organizations, corporations, and governments may result in the deterioration of rational decision-making that leads to irrational actions and poor choices. Groupthink can cause an illusion of invulnerability and a collective effort to rationalize or discount warnings. Examples include the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986, despite warnings of potential disaster. The invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 ended in disaster due to dissenting members of President Kennedy's cabinet failing to speak up, even though they wanted to advise against it.

**Hawthorne Effect:** the tendency of people to change their behavior when they know they are being watched (LO 2.3.2)

The Hawthorne Effect is also known as the "observer effect" and speaks to one of the challenges of sociological research: people, unlike plants or inanimate objects, may adjust their behavior at will. That means they may change their actions if they know they are being watched or feel the researcher is looking for certain behaviors. The problem is that by adjusting their behavior, the research

subjects are not presenting an accurate picture of themselves or their true actions in a given situation.

**Hypothesis:** an educated guess about a relationship between two or more situations, events, or factors (LO 2.1.2)

The scientific method starts with a hunch or an educated guess about how one social variable will impact another. The goal is to use the steps of the scientific method to prove the hypothesis to be true or false. A simplistic example is: "Violent crime increases in the summer months." A complex example is: "Social capital is decreasing due to the lack of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, and information associated with social networks."

**In-depth Interview:** a one-on-one open-ended method that probes for deeper meaning and understanding of the responses of the interviewee (LO 2.2.2)

This research method is most often conducted face-to-face and is capable of probing to gain a deeper understanding of topics that may be sensitive or complex. It is time-consuming and can be expensive to conduct, especially if a large number of interviews are required. It requires trained interviewers and skillful interpretation of the field notes. In most cases, results cannot be generalized to the larger population.

**Independent Variable:** a factor that causes a change in another variable (LO 2.1.2)

A research hypothesis can have multiple independent variables. For example, with contributing factors of drug use, the independent variables could include race, age, income, family history or drug abuse, and education. One or all of these independent variables could potentially be a factor that changes the dependent variable of drug use.

**Informed Consent:** a signed statement by participants indicating full knowledge of the risks involved, and acknowledgement of the procedures to withdraw from the study at any time willingly (LO 2.1.2)

As part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, the informed consent statement is required for many research projects, particularly qualitative research designs. The informed consent provides a general overview of the research project, a description of any foreseeable risks or discomforts to the participant, any benefits of participating, an explanation of how to exit the study, where to receive treatment if needed, and how to contact for questions. The informed consent must be signed before a participant can join a study.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB):** a committee that reviews research proposals to protect the rights and welfare of human participants in research (LO 2.1.2)

The IRB committee is important in universities, hospitals, and research institutions. The IRB protects human subjects and animals from physical, psychological, economic, social, and legal harm. Every university research project must submit a proposal for approval before beginning the research. Some stringent rules and regulations must be followed, and most researchers must participate in online training and receive a certificate regarding research and human subjects.

**Longitudinal Design:** the repeated observation of the same subjects over a duration of time (LO 2.2.1)

This research method is used to study social problems and trends. It is expensive to conduct and can require years or decades to complete. The longest-running household longitudinal study in the world is the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). The study began in 1968 with a nationally representative sample of over 18,000 individuals living in 5,000 families in the United States. Information such as employment, income, health, childbearing, philanthropy, education, and numerous other topics, has been collected continuously on these individuals and their descendants.

**Objectivity:** the effort to eliminate bias from the research (LO 2.3.2)

Objectivity is also known as **value neutrality**. In sociological research, the researcher sets aside their values and beliefs to be a neutral observer grounded

in fairness and impartiality. Objectivity results in more accurate conclusions about the subject under investigation.

**Operational Definition:** a clear, concise, and observable measure of the variable (LO 2.1.2)

If a researcher is studying couples who have been married for 50 or more years and is examining if the couples fell in and out of love, and if so, how often, then an operational definition of the phrases is important to ensure valid results. The key to the research project is providing a definition that can be understood and measured regarding what it means to “fall in love” and “fall out of love.” Most likely, all of the participants will have a slightly different interpretation of the phrases that will potentially skew or invalidate the results. Therefore, to ensure that the researcher is measuring these phrases accurately, a clear definition must be communicated to the participants, and an understood determination must be made. This will result in strong validity.

**Participation Observation:** also called participant observation, a method in which the researcher participates in the social phenomenon being studied. (LO 2.2.2)

This research method can be the most controversial, requiring the researcher to interact within the studied social setting. There are two types - overt and covert participant observation. If overt, the researcher self-discloses that the group or organization is being studied. If covert, the researcher is like an undercover agent. This raises ethical research issues with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and is much more challenging to get approved.

**Peer Review:** a process by which research is evaluated by a group of experts in the specific subject area (LO 2.1.2)

Most academic journals are considered peer-reviewed, meaning that a submitted article is read by at least three experts in the field related to the article's topic. The name of the author is not revealed to the reviewers. Based on the reviews, the editor accepts, rejects, or requests the author to make edits and resubmit the article. This process can be lengthy and take up to two years

before an article accepted for publication in an academic journal is actually published.

**Qualitative Research Design:** data collection using interviews, fieldwork, observation, photos, text, and other subjective measures (LO 2.1.2)

This design is based on subjective measures but is still a scientific process. Qualitative research requires skills to conduct, and the use of sophisticated technology is common among some of the research methods. An example of qualitative research is the content analysis of the cover photos of the teen magazine *Seventeen*. The hypothesis could be that the cover photos of *Seventeen* depict the All-American teenager. One aspect of the subjectivity would be how the coders operationalize the concept of "All-American."

**Quantitative Research Design:** data collection that focuses on exploring correlations by using systematic, numerical, and other objective measures to generalize across groups of people. (LO 2.1.2)

This design utilizes objective measures as opposed to subjective measures. The variables can be easily quantified, and the data can be statistically analyzed. This design is used to generalize the data to a larger population. Census data allows the researcher to apply the findings to a segment of society or the entire society.

**Reliability:** the extent to which a study yields the same result in repeated studies (LO 2.1.2)

One aspect of reliability is whether different raters or observers provide consistent interpretations of the same social phenomenon. Also, are the results consistent if the same survey is administered at different times? If other researchers were to conduct the same experiment under the same circumstances, the results should be the same.

**Representative Sample:** a subset of the population whose characteristics accurately reflect those of the larger population from which it is drawn (LO 2.1.2)

This sample type is normally derived from large data sets such as the U.S. Census. This allows the researcher to draw statistical inferences from the census data that can be applied to the larger population. For example, if the data set has 1,000,000 census surveys and every 50$^{th}$ survey is drawn, this allows for a sample of 20,000 cases, which is more manageable for statistical analysis. The results of the analysis would be representative of the 1,000,000 surveys.

**Sample of Convenience:** a research sample based on the ease of accessibility of the research subjects (LO 2.3.2)

A sample of convenience involves the researcher relying on friends, acquaintances, or people close to populate her study instead of more formal research sampling methods. The problem with a sample of convenience is that it needs to be representative of the population overall and might not result in research that allows for generalizations about the topic under investigation.

**Scientific Method:** the process a sociologist uses to develop and test theories. (LO 2.1.1)

The scientific method involves using a range of tools to observe, research, measure and investigate aspects of the social world to test various theories. Tools used by sociologist include, but are not limited to, surveys, documents, and experiments. The effective application of the scientific method results in collecting and analyzing data such that conclusions can be drawn and findings reported.

**Secondary Analysis:** the use of data previously collected for other purposes (LO 2.2.1)

Emile Durkheim conducted the first sociological study and used secondary analysis as his research method. This method utilized existing data, such as that compiled from governmental records. The U.S. Census data sets are available

to researchers at no cost and can be accessed quickly compared to time-consuming data collection such as in-depth interviews. Powerful statistical software packages such as SPSS are used to analyze the data.

**Snowball Sampling:** a process in which people in the group being studied introduce the research to other people to study (LO 2.3.1)

Snowball sampling is a technique in which the researcher asks study subjects to help recruit other people to participate. This research method is particularly effective if the researcher is studying a group of people that are hard to locate. So, for example, if a researcher is trying to study the homeless populations of Jamaican descent living in the U.S., it might be easier to ask others of that group to recommend study participants instead of putting an advertisement in a newspaper or roaming the streets looking for people fitting that description.

**Survey:** a series of questions used to extract specific information from respondents (LO 2.2.1)

The survey is a cost-effective research method, can often be developed quickly, and is relatively easy to administer. Respondents can be remotely surveyed via online surveys, and many can be surveyed simultaneously. Surveys with only closed-ended questions can lower validity and vague questions.

**Sustainability:** the idea that current and future generations should have equal or greater access to social, economic, and environmental resources (LO 2.2.4)

Sustainability includes three spheres – social, economic, and environmental. This term is becoming part of the vocabulary of governmental and corporate entities, organizations, and individuals. The triple bottom line within a business is stressed, including focusing on people, the planet, and profit. The environmental sphere often receives more attention than the other two, as it is the easiest to explain and address. Fair Trade farms and cooperatives show how all three spheres receive equal attention. Thus, people's lives are enhanced, and the planet is preserved.

**Time Diary Method:** a research method in which subjects track their actions at various points in time over several days (LO 2.3.2)

The time diary method is designed to study patterns of behavior. It accounts for the research subject's activities based on increments of time. It is unemployed as a method of comparing or confirming what the subject is doing over time versus what they say or perceive themselves as doing. A time diary may be in paper, electronic, or journal form.

**Validity:** the extent that a study measures what it claims to measure (LO 2.1.2)

Validity asks, "Am I measuring what I intend to measure?" Sociological research focuses on scientifically and systematically measuring social phenomena, so it is important to accurately state what is being measured and demonstrate who is being measured since the subject being researched can be intangible or extremely broad. For example, what is the best means of measuring social integration? How will you know if you accurately measure the concept and maintain the study's validity?

**Value Neutrality:** the efforts to eliminate bias from the research (LO 2.3.2)

Value neutrality is also known as **objectivity**. In sociological research, the researcher sets aside their values and beliefs to be a neutral observer grounded in fairness and impartiality. Value neutrality results in more accurate conclusions about the subject under investigation.

**Verstehen:** pronounced fehr-shtay-en; an empathetic approach to understanding human behavior (LO 2.4.2)

First introduced to sociology by Max Weber, verstehen is a German term for "to understand." From a sociological perspective, verstehen refers to the effort of the researcher to understand the study subject's behavior from their point of view. More broadly, this involves understanding the larger meaning behind human behavior and not just taking actions at face value.