Research in Social Problems
HOW can we study Social Problems?
Theory and Data

IDEAS/SOCIAL THEORY

ANALYTIC FRAMES

IMAGES

REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE

EVIDENCE/DATA

Construct

Concept

Variable

Observation

From Charles C. Ragin, 1994
Constructing Social Research

SOCIOLGY 403: SOCIAL PROBLEMS
The Measurement Process

How do we link theory and data?

Conceptualization = defining the meaning of a construct

Operationalization = specifying a way to measure a concept
Conceptualization and Operationalization

Independent Variable

Abstract Construct

Conceptualization

Conceptual Definition

Operationalization

Indicator or Measure

Dependent Variable

Abstract Construct

Conceptualization

Conceptual Definition

Operationalization

Indicator or Measure

Hypothetical Causal Relationship


SOCIOLOGY 403: SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Collecting Data

Surveys

- Convert ideas, attitudes, perceptions and behavior into numbers
- Performed using face-to-face/telephone interviews or mailed/internet questionnaires
- Sampling (choosing subjects) must be done carefully to ensure that responses from the sample represent the population
Collecting Data

Participant Observation

• Directly watching and recording activities of a particular group

• Researcher may be *participant* in group

• Multidimensional – researcher examines many aspects of group behavior

• Ethnography is a common way of doing observational research

SOCIOMETRY 403: SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Collecting Data

Secondary Sources and Documents

- *Non-reactive* measures
- Existing statistics, e.g. Census data
- Documents, photos, videos, e.g. content analysis
- Other artifacts, e.g. garbage, professional papers
Collecting Data

Experiments

• Draws conclusions about social behavior based on group comparisons

• *Control* vs. *treatment* groups

• Variables measured pre- and post-treatment

• Classic experiments are uncommon in sociology; however, some sociologists try to recreate the logic of experiments in the field
## Comparing Research Designs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Questionnaires; Interviews</td>
<td>Yields information about specific issues</td>
<td>Can be expensive and time-consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Yields detailed information about specific groups or organizations</td>
<td>Involves months if not years of labor-intensive data gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>Deliberate manipulation of people’s social behavior</td>
<td>Yields direct measures of people’s behavior</td>
<td>Ethical limitations on the degree to which subjects’ behavior can be manipulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Analysis</td>
<td>Analysis of census or health data; Analysis of films or TV commercials</td>
<td>Cost-efficiency</td>
<td>Limited to data collected for some other purpose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Schaefer, p. 41

**SOCIOLoGY 403: SOCIAL PROBLEMS**
The Measurement Process

How do we know a measure is trustworthy?

Two Criteria:

**Reliability** = consistency, dependability, repeatability

**Validity** = accuracy in measurement, truthfulness in representing the construct you defined
Criminal Justice as a Social Problem

Which is a bigger problem, CRIME?

or

CRIMINAL JUSTICE?