

SOC497/L: SOCIOLOGY RESEARCH METHODS

Conceptualization:

Clarifying Research Topics

Ellis Godard

Admin Concepts Operations Reality Labs Etc

Outline for Today

- ◆ Concepts
- ◆ Operations
- ◆ Reality (?)
- ◆ Lab: Love

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Announcements

- ◆ Lots of work coming back; watch email
- ◆ PDF updated in the meantime; PR OTW
- ◆ Everyone's finally does the Intake Form ☺
- ◆ Still missing 11 headshots (1/4 the class)
- ◆ Three weeks until survey draft starts
 - TWO questions each – ONE class survey!

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The quiz app is...

- A. A helpful tool 73%
- B. An amazing technology 24%
- C. Better than Christmas 0%
- D. Better than good company 3%
- E. Better than good company on Christmas 0%

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Inline for Today

- ◆ Inquiry > Design
- ◆ Theory > Hypotheses
- ◆ Research is nexus of those 2

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Q1. How much reading was there for this lecture?

- A. ~2 pages 5%
- ✓ B. ~12 pages 88%
- C. ~22 pages 7%
- D. ~32 pages 0%
- E. ~42 pages 0%

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The Concept of Generations

- ◆ What generation are you?
- ◆ What is a "Millennial"?
- ◆ What is "Gen X"? "Gen Z"?

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Concepts vs. Operations

Idea

- ◆ Wealth
- ◆ Inequality
- ◆ Deviance
- ◆ Gender

Measurement

- ◆ Income, wages, acreage (etc) owned, stocks held – plus, individual? Family? Household? pre/post tax?
- ◆ In what – wealth? Status? Power? How measured?
- ◆ Violating what norm(s)? How? 1000s+ of e.g.'s
- ◆ Lost of ways, none great
 - By Trump's official policy, we are all female

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Open Letter to Pew Rsrch Center

We are demographers and other social scientists, writing to urge the Pew Research Center to stop using its generation labels (currently: Silent, Baby Boom, X, Millennial, Z). We appreciate Pew's surveys and other research, and urge them to bring this work into better alignment with scientific principles of social research.

1. Pew's "generations" **cause confusion**. The groups Pew calls Silent, Baby Boom, X, Millennial, and Z are birth cohorts determined by year of birth, which are not related to reproductive generations. There is further confusion because their arbitrary lengths (18, 19, 16, 16, and 16 years, respectively) have grown shorter as the age difference between parents and their children has lengthened.
2. The division between "generations" is arbitrary and has **no scientific basis**...
3. Naming "generations" and fixing their birth dates **promotes pseudoscience**, undermines public understanding, and impedes social science research....
4. The popular "generations" and their labels **undermine important... life course research**...
5. The "generations" are **widely misunderstood to be "official"** categories ...
6. The "generations" scheme has become a parody and should end.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1N3mWlpwJmZPmVArVrNfI28ct_HuYASAbIq1GmcViofc/edit?usp=sharing (July 2021)

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Q2. Which of these is not a concept?

1. Authority
13%

2. Hate
0%

3. Love
0%

4. Kissing
80%

5. Prejudice
7%

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Other things you think mean something definitive (but don't)

- ◆ Learning styles – nonsense?
- ◆ Weight, Time, Color – evolve
- ◆ Truth, Science, Sociology – contentious
- ◆ Professor ☺ & Student ☺
- ◆ Social structure, social control, etc. ...

- ◆ You can't *measure* something if you can't say (not just "don't know") what you *mean* by it

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Conceptualization Defined

Definition

- Process of *agreeing on meaning* of a term?
- Process of *naming some idea* with that term!
- Concept: mental image to approximate reality
- Covers many instances (examples, not cases)

In Practice

- Requires expertise, effort, & ingenuity
- Not just Social science – though more explicit
 - ◆ Makes sense – asks us to rethink our reality
 - ◆ But much sociology = *solely* conceptual (useless?)

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3 Problems w/ Concepts

- ◆ Bias against conceptualization
 - Weber and Parsons tarnished the idea
 - Many in the discipline continue that role ☹
- ◆ Concepts may conceal embedded biases
 - Ideological, political, etc.
 - Terrorism
- ◆ Can't have "conclusive" conceptualization
 - It's just a useful tool
 - Consistent application may -> convention

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Q3: Concepts are problematic due to all but which of the following...

1. Biases within & against them
3%
2. Over-conceptualization of them
0%
3. Under-conceptualization of them
3%
4. Their non-conclusiveness
3%
5. Their complete uselessness
93%

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Issues w/ Core (?) Concepts

- ◆ Class – Immeasurable? Not useful? *Meaningless?*
 - What *did* he mean? What *is* a "class"...?
 - Marx certain he knew what he meant; does anyone else?
 - Is it a useful idea? "Are there classes in America?"
- ◆ Social *Forces* over-conceptualized; not *cohesive*
 - Inequality – economic? status? power?
 - Structure – 18 different things?
- ◆ Social *Problems* under-conceptualized; not *useful*
 - Crime – violation of the law
 - Deviance – violation of norms

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THE 5 LOVE LANGUAGES

Each of these pairs a concept w/ an operation –

Words of Affirmation: Your tacos are delicious.
Acts of Service: I made you tacos.
Receiving Gifts: Here's a taco.
Quality Time: Let's go out for tacos together.
Physical Touch: Let me hold you like a taco.



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But Concepts Matter

- ◆ Operations on their own are of limited value
 - Want to understand & analyze comparatively
 - Want to think of in broader context/meaning
- ◆ Abstractions help link data & theory
 - "Wheel of Science" – induction/deduction
 - Connect generalizations to observations (& *vice versa*)
- ◆ Want to understand theory better
 - Not MDW, but notion of comprehensive organizing ideas
 - Respect *idea* of it, even if not your experience w/ it
 - Concepts *could* and *should* be useful, or why have them?
 - They *should* help make sense of the world

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Operationalization

- ◆ Process of specifying *instances* of concepts
 - What will "it" (whatever it is) "look like"
 - How will we know it when we see it? What *counts*?
 - Operations/indicators are signs of presence/absence of the concept studied
- ◆ Babbie says must be specific because subjective
 - Measurements are better/worse – can evaluate them
 - All meanings are contentious & subject to dispute
 - Aim to be specific, to enhance objectivity

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Specifying Dimensions

- ◆ Aspects of a Concept (or Construct)
 - Groups or Subgroups of instances
 - Most concepts are multi-dimensional – can group several ways
- ◆ Religiosity
 - Belief, Ritual, Devotional, Knowledge
- ◆ Prejudice
 - Feelings, not actions (behavior = Discrimination)
 - Racial, ethnic, gender
- ◆ Compassion
 - For animals vs For humans
 - What we want for them vs. what they want for themselves

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Making them Real

- ◆ Try to make the best tool that we can
 - Verbosity can be impediment
 - Can use shorthands, idioms, slang, even clichés
 - May provide more agreement (so more reliable)
 - Fanciness isn't necessary (preferred)
 - Erudition is useful only if it provides reliable measure
 - Complexity doesn't help
 - Want parsimony (simplicity) for validity, reliability, etc.
- ◆ Danger of Reification
 - Even meaningless constructs are treated as if real
 - Society has lost its family values. Drugs are dangerous.
 - Result is *loss* of meaning & precision

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Classes of "Measureables"

- ◆ Direct observables – lab today
- ◆ Indirect observables – survey, exam
- ◆ Constructs
 - Two examples:
 - Scales/index (computing from dimensions)
 - IQ, SES, religiosity, self-esteem, political efficacy
 - Ideal types (how much of a concept)
 - Represent abstraction from facts
 - But not conceptual – measurable variables
 - *Based* on observations even though not *observable*

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Q4. Important operational challenges include all but which of the following?

Challenge	Percentage
1. Avoiding reification	56%
2. Simplifying measurements	3%
3. Specifying dimensions	0%
4. Starting with clear concepts	10%
5. The ontological reality of concepts	31%

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Constructs, Concepts, & Reality

- ◆ Babbie takes ontological position
 - Constructs (prejudice, compassion) don't "really" exist
 - Can't privilege them as really "out there"
- ◆ Needn't impede our methodological processes
 - ◆ Don't need to posit a *de facto* "real" existence
 - Don't need to get essential nature (*that* doesn't exist)
 - Not really a challenge to operationalization
 - Just need to agree on tool that *works* (not what *is*)
 - Can then act *as if* they "exist", & measure them
 - They are "real" *enough* if they help order facts
 - E.g. whether prejudice exists and to what degree
 - Easiest to operationalize if start w/ clear concepts
 - But, can be confusing, meaningless, even dangerous...

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Lab Exercise Sequencing

- ◆ Recently: Manipulating operations
 - *Computing* a new variable by combining others
 - *Recoding* values into a new structure
- ◆ Today: Focus = clear *concepts* first
 - *Nothing* has a sole, obvious measurement
 - Question assumptions
 - Can't measure something w/o defining it first
 - Think critically about precision
 - Must do for project – or in *any* inquiry

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Prep for Love Lab (group prep)

- ◆ Research Question: How much love is there on campus?
 - Not just "lots or not much" – depends on how many people!
 - Not clear what "love" means – lust? Affection? for whom/what?
- ◆ Before you leave lab, email your names & 2 answers:

(the additional, lower-tier questions are to generate discussion – I don't need answers)

 - How does your group *conceptualize* "love"?
 - What kind of love are you interested in looking for? (pick one dimension)
 - Not what does it look like – What does it mean? What *is* love?
 - Don't just say "a feeling of attachment..." to who/what?
 - How has your group *operationalized* "love"?
 - What does it look like? How would you know it when you see it?
 - What will you count? (pick one indicator!)
- ◆ You can't do the lab if you don't do that part
 - Group decisions as guardrails are part of the assignment

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Team Scores

Points	Team	Points	Team
4	Better than good company		
3.93	An amazing technology		
3.79	A helpful tool		

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Conducting the Love Lab (solo)

- ◆ Individually observe using those answers
 - Go sit in one place **on a campus** for **15 min.** & take notes
 - Note/count any instances you see of your operations
 - Be sure to note/count how many people do *not* exhibit them
- ◆ Write a brief research summary
 - Write *brief* (1p?) summary of how much love there is on campus
 - Include your name (I don't need the others in the group)
 - Be clear about your conceptualization & operationalization
- ◆ Submit your *notes and summary*
 - As dated & timed @ Canvas

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