Using a clear, easily followed approach, Designing and Conducting Your First Interview Project helps anyone new to the process develop the skills to conduct the most essential part of social research data collection: the interview. The book also shows how to organize, analyze, and interpret the data.

This workbook provides a step-by-step template for a collaborative class experience in social science. Organized according to the steps of the deductive scientific method, it includes essential activities to take place during class after the appropriate chapter has been read. The book begins with the process of choosing a topic and proceeds through hypothesis development, interview data collection, data entry using SPSS, and elementary data analysis. The final chapter includes the formal assignment and instructions to students on how to write about their experiences in a way that will produce an excellent final paper. By selecting the hypothesis, gathering the data, and analyzing the results, students will gain an appreciation for the strengths and potential weaknesses of “knowing” things through doing quantitative social science.

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DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING YOUR FIRST INTERVIEW PROJECT

Bruce K. Friesen

JB
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For Brittany and Justin
This book aims, above all, to teach excitement through the joy of discovery. It is my contention that students learn more from doing than from listening or reading alone. Whether in a class of eight or eight hundred, students need to be given opportunities to kinetically explore the craft of sociology. Activity, accompanied by guided reflection and positive affect, stimulates engagement, internalization, inquisitiveness, and the search for answers. Through this semester-long project, students will taste what it feels like to do deductive social science. They’ll search the peer-reviewed literature, form a class hypothesis, and develop the project from conceptualization to operationalization. They’ll perform a handful of interviews, enter data into computers, and produce and analyze the results. They’ll walk out of your class with a semester full of experiences on which to reflect.

This book is a part of the paradigmatic shift taking place in how college courses are being taught. A burgeoning interdisciplinary, empirically based literature on the science of college teaching has been revolutionizing the traditional college course (see, for example, Bain, 2004; Brookfield, 1995; Fink, 2003; Finkel, 2000; McKeachie, 2005; McKinney, 2007; and Weimar 2002). Lecture-based courses are being modified to include more group discussion, case studies, student presentations, peer-to-peer instruction, dialogue, and active learning projects. Radical new perspectives, defining teaching as a form of scholarship (Boyer, 1997), have been adopted by institutions of higher education and are being integrated into the institutional reward structures for the professoriate. Full- and part-time instructors are shifting focus from a science of teaching to a science of learning. There is good reason for this sea change: active learning strategies produce a more sustained, substantial, and positive impact on how students think, act, and feel. (I am indebted to Bain, 2004, for this definition of learning.)

DEVELOPMENT

This project has gone through several iterations, having been used consistently with Introduction to Sociology classes over the past twenty years. It’s been refined though use with classes as small as twelve students and as large as 330. When executed well, the project teaches the joy of discovery through deductive social science. Students are presented with the notion that their perceptions of the social world are not always what they seem to be, which invokes a teachable moment that challenges students to ask themselves questions related to knowing. Asking questions is the first step in developing the mind of a scientist.
An enhanced version of this project has also been used with success in Research Methods classes for the past four years. Chapters Eleven and Twelve contain information specifically for use in upper-division classes. These chapters empower students to perform computer-assisted data analysis, thus familiarizing them with decisions affecting validity and reliability that must be made at every step of the process. Motivated to work through the problems in order to test their hypotheses and complete the project, students gain mastery in the logic and technique of computer data entry and analysis. That these are marketable skills goes without saying.

In addition to twenty years of use and revision, the development of the book form of this project was tested successfully with a group of Introductory to Sociology students in the summer of 2009. Five reviewers also gave invaluable input. The version you hold in your hands is much improved as a result.

ORGANIZATION

The book is organized according to the steps of the deductive scientific method. Essential to the success of this project are a few activities that take place during class after the appropriate chapter has been read. Further suggestions for course organization are available in the instructor’s resources on the book’s website. The first chapter introduces students to the process of choosing a topic, after which the class collectively decides on a topic to research. Chapter Two teaches students how to conduct a small literature review and how to distinguish empirical articles from others in peer-reviewed journals. Chapters Three and Four give students some practice in thinking about issues of conceptualization, theory development, and articulation of a hypothesis.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven expose students to critical issues in research design, applying it to the class interview project yet to come. Chapters Eight and Nine are what amounts to interviewer training for the students, teaching them to be as systematic and as ethical as possible. Instructors will want to review these concepts in class the day they hand out the blank interview forms to students. It is the instructor who ultimately creates a brief, one-page, two-sided interview schedule to distribute to students. Students in turn interview enough of their peers so that the class as a whole completes at least two hundred interviews. Incidentally, many universities and colleges do not require full approval by an institutional review board for pedagogical projects of this nature. Be sure to check the policies at your own institution.

Chapter Ten instructs students on how to enter their interview data into a computer using SPSS. After cleaning the data, students submit their files in electronic form to the instructor, who in turn compiles all of the data into a master data file. Having students enter data greatly enhances their knowledge of the research process and decreases the amount of work an instructor would otherwise do. If desired, though, instructors can instead choose to enter the class interviews on their own and have students skip this chapter.
Chapters Eleven and Twelve are best used only with students enrolled in upper-division classes such as Research Methods. The chapters contain instructions on how to collapse variables, create simple composite variables using the Count or Compute command, and produce frequency and cross-tabulation tables using SPSS.

Chapter Thirteen informs students how to interpret a cross-tabulation table so they can decide whether or not the data support their class hypothesis. The chapter also covers the logic of controlling for a third variable and how to interpret tables produced through table elaboration. Included in the chapter are instructions on how to produce partial-order tables in SPSS for students in advanced courses. Introduction to Sociology students are fully capable of understanding the logic of controlling for a third variable, but only students in advanced courses should be expected to produce such output.

Chapter Fourteen is the final one; it includes the formal assignment and instructions on how to write about their experiences in a way that produces an excellent final paper. The assignment consists of a series of questions. Students demonstrate their knowledge of the research process by responding fully to all the questions.

In a concluding attempt to increase the quality of final papers, instructors are encouraged to have students perform peer reviews of one another’s papers on the date they are due in class. This gives them specific feedback as to the grade they would receive if they were to hand in the paper in its present form. A detailed rubric created specifically for the peer review exercise is available on the companion website for this book. Students grade one another’s papers on this day, using the prepared rubric. Instead of handing in the assignment, students are instead given an additional week to make further improvements, armed with the comments of a peer and the detailed rubric. This greatly improves the quality of the papers and, with the detailed rubric, makes grading simple.

FEATURES

Compared to other supplemental sociology texts, this book is unique. It assumes no prior knowledge of the scientific method or familiarity with SPSS on the part of the student or the instructor; all of this information is provided. It fosters an experiential-based learning opportunity that students build on over the semester. Instructors will find all they need in the instructor’s resources online to familiarize themselves with the logic of the deductive method or with using SPSS.

Affect is as important a characteristic in classes as content, particularly in lower-division classes. Positive emotional states and contextualization of activities within the large questions of life give most students enough intrinsic motivation to be involved and aim for excellence (Bain, 2004). The text therefore includes examples and explanations designed to produce this affective relevance. Students who understand that their training has important implications for themselves and others are inclined to be motivated and happy.
The text also addresses the dearth of pedagogical materials needed to build quantitative literacy—a need formally identified by the American Sociological Association (ASA, 2006). To do this, the research project has been simplified to aid comprehension at the first-year level. Students need consult only three journal articles in their literature review. Tests of reliability are not conducted on indices or scales used, though individual instructors are welcome to do so on their own. Instructors have the choice of involving students in operationalizing variables, entering, analyzing, and producing tables. Opting out of these possibilities, this book leads students through the bare bones of a research project designed to teach one thing above all else: the joy of discovery.

The project is framed within the classic deductive method of social science, but this choice is in no way meant to suggest that deductive science is more valid or valuable than an inductive or qualitative approach to doing sociology. Development of a qualitative sociology has greatly strengthened the discipline and enriched our understanding of the complexity of human behavior. This project is simply an opportunity for students to become familiar with the deductive logic of science so they can knowledgeably evaluate for themselves its potential and its shortcomings. Sociology majors continue to graduate with an education deficit in quantitative sociology (ASA, 2006); once familiar with the process, students can be challenged to consider alternative ways of knowing, including a qualitative approach.

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

Instructors with varying levels of familiarity with quantitative sociology will feel comfortable adopting this text and course project. It assumes little prior knowledge of the process on the part of either the student or the instructor. Helpful resources are available on the companion website, for any instructor adopting the text. Concepts and procedures are clearly explained in the subsequent chapters. Instructors can modify the project to meet a variety of pedagogical goals. This assignment can be added to any existing course with minimal adaptation.

It is strongly advised, however, that instructors make use of the resources available on the companion website (www.josseybass.com/go/friesen). Important material describing the optimal way to integrate the project into a class is available, along with lecture materials, rubrics, and more. At a minimum, expect to dedicate approximately one hour of class time to select a research topic for the project, a second hour to review the interview schedule with students and conduct interviewer training, and a third hour for students to evaluate one another’s papers. Demonstrating SPSS data entry in a class session is also helpful. Instructors of lower-division courses will want to produce and distribute tables for the class, to complete the final assignment.

If students are expected to enter the data from their own interviews, they will either need access to SPSS in computer labs or an opportunity to purchase the student version of SPSS to install on their own computers. Other options for course integration are shared on the website.
NOTE TO STUDENTS

Congratulations! You’re embarking on a project that could change your life. This statement may sound like a bit of an exaggeration to you right now, but it’s not meant as a joke. There are times in our lives when we discover something useful that applies to many parts of our lives. It’s empowering. Some types of knowledge help us make better sense of our lives. Others help us gain control or make better decisions. You’ll eventually decide on the kind of impact the knowledge contained in this book will have on you.

The new knowledge you’ll gain through this class exercise is awareness of the methods by which people claim to “know” things. Think about it. How do you know that the world is round? Have you ever walked around the world, or otherwise circumnavigated the globe? Not many of us have. Have you ever seen the curvature of the earth? If not, how do you know it is round and not flat? You might suggest that you know it is round because you’ve seen pictures of earth that were taken from the moon or somewhere in space. But how do you know those photos were not fabricated? At some point many of us make a choice: to either trust or not trust the photos or information presented to us in books and online.

This is just the point: trust. In what ways of knowing do you put your trust? Suppose you read something in a textbook that contradicts something your parents told you. Which source is more trustworthy, in your eyes? Perhaps it depends in part on the question you are trying to answer. If you want to know whether you have, say, a brain aneurysm, you might trust a brain surgeon more than your parents for an accurate diagnosis. Which would you rather use to measure the speed of an automobile: a radar camera like those operated by the police, or a thermometer? “Don’t be ridiculous!” you might exclaim. “You can’t use a thermometer to measure speed!” This is, of course, precisely the point. Some ways of knowing are better than others, depending on what it is you want to find out.

Science is a way of knowing, a way to find things out about the world. When it comes to finding things out about the natural world, science has been an incredibly powerful tool in giving human beings the ability to control their environment. Today we can build massive dams (more than 60 percent of Holland would be under water if it were not for their expansive system of dikes), towering skyscrapers, and bridges. We know what it takes to increase human longevity and quality of life. Space travel has become so routine that even private companies now offer rides into space. We’ve also discovered incredible power in the form of nuclear fission that generates electricity for many homes and cities—but also has the ability to level entire cities in the form of a nuclear weapon.

How good is science as a way of knowing about our social world? That is the topic of this book. As you work your way through this project, you’ll be exposed to the deductive logic of the scientific method and will use it to gather information about our social world. After the project is finished, you’ll be in a better place to evaluate the use of science as a method to investigate the social world. Perhaps your respect for science will increase as you become more familiar with the logic and rigor inherent in the process. Who knows? It might even change your life.
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I’d be remiss not to mention the hundreds of students who have enrolled in classes over the years in which this project was used. Their feedback and performance on the completed assignment yielded valuable information used to refine the project. I’m particularly indebted to the students in my summer 2009 Introduction to Sociology course at the University of Tampa, who were the first to use a draft of this text. The high class interest and extensive dialogue about the science of society, a result of the enriched material in the book chapters, actually surprised me. I appreciate their excitement for the book and helpful feedback.

Finally, this book was produced during a time of personal challenge. The ongoing encouragement and support of family and friends helped see this project through to completion. Particular thanks go to my partner, Cheryl Lucas; colleagues Dr. Jeff Skowronek, Dr. James Woodson, and Dr. Connie Rynder; extended family members Ruth Nickel, Dr. John W. Friesen, and Dr. Virginia Friesen; and my children, Brittany and Justin. There are others; you know who you are.

Though the content of this book has been enhanced by the contributions of many, I alone am responsible for its content. If it inspires others to imagine new possibilities as to how the world might be improved through sociology, my goal will have been achieved.

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Choosing a Topic
Designing and Conducting Your First Interview Project

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discover how social scientists go about choosing a topic to study.
- Be able to identify a sociological problem.
- Prepare for the discussion in which a topic of study will be selected by the class.

The first step in conducting a scientific study is to select a topic you would like to investigate. Your instructor will dedicate some class time for you and your fellow students to list possible topics for your research and agree together on one hypothesis that you will investigate as a class. The purpose of this chapter is to help prepare you for that discussion. First, we review how social scientists come to identify topics that they eventually do research on. Next, we help you think through some issues that will help your class choose a topic appropriate for this particular exercise.

HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS CHOOSE A TOPIC TO STUDY

Have you ever considered entering a vocation that involves discovering things people don’t know? Many people who conduct research today do so, in part, because it is an essential part of their jobs. Social scientists who engage in research are often professors in colleges and universities around the world. For them, conducting research is a benefit of the job because a passion for the joy of discovery is what led many into their vocations in the first place. In some large research universities, one’s ability to do quality research is even more important than the ability to teach. The ability to conduct research is, for many professors, the most important component by which they are evaluated.

Your own professor likely has job requirements that include conducting research and publishing the results. These expectations differ with the educational institution. Instructors in community colleges or technical institutes typically have a heavy teaching load and few requirements to conduct regular research. The same is true for part-time or adjunct faculty at large universities. They are hired primarily to teach. If adjunct faculty hope to get permanent positions as professors (rather than being hired year-to-year, often for low pay), they need to find time to do research and publish, in addition to spending many hours every week in the front of the classroom.

Faculty at private colleges are also rewarded by conducting research, though the expectations are usually somewhat less than for faculty in large public universities. This is because...
Choosing a Topic

A primary mission of most private colleges is quality teaching. Still, few faculty get tenured without a reasonable record of publication. Articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals are still those that garner the greatest respect in science-based disciplines. Virtually all professors in the social sciences are expected to do research as a requirement of the job.

Other professionals paid to conduct research are people with a graduate degree (that is, a master’s or Ph.D.) who are hired by government or research firms to investigate certain phenomena. Ph.D. graduates can secure a postdoctorate, a one- or two-year university position that involves doing research. For these and many other positions, conducting research and publishing the results are integral parts of the job. They do little or no teaching so they can focus almost exclusively on their research. Imagine what an opportunity it is to work full-time making new discoveries.

For professionals with a full-time research job, the topic they investigate is often predetermined by the company or expert they work for, the government department in which they are employed, or the client they are serving. Professionals employed at major polling firms, for example, typically enjoy a large salary and perquisites, not to mention many excellent resources to help collect good-quality data. For some, though, disadvantages of the job are having someone else dictate the research topic and having little time to more fully explore interesting relationships and patterns in the data than what was asked for by the client.

Pursuing Your Own Interests

A major joy of being a professor is that the selection of a research topic is often determined by one’s own interests and passions. Think about it! What would you like to find out more about in life? What do you feel passionate about? Good-quality information is often a critical part of solving any social problem. If you want to reduce crime, for example, you first need to know what the crime rate is, what motivates people to engage in criminal activity, and whether or not there are patterns to certain types of crime. You’ll also want to know whether any attempts to solve social problems are effective, or whether they’re just wasting people’s time and money. Collecting good-quality information on a topic about which you are passionately interested is one of the most rewarding aspects of a professor’s job.

I’ll share a personal example to illustrate. Growing up in the 1970s, I was keenly aware of controversy surrounding heavy metal music, which many deemed harmful or even evil. Many of my friends, though, closely identified with the music. For my master’s thesis, I chose to conduct a qualitative investigation into the heavy metal subculture. At the time, heavy metal music was seen as the most deviant style of music around. I spent a year in the...
scene, with people who consumed and produced the music. I analyzed the lyrics of almost three hundred heavy metal songs. I even played in a hard rock band as a drummer for a few months to get a feel for what it’s like to create the music.

Through this experience, I found that the values promulgated in the subculture weren’t all that different from those of mainstream society, and especially other leisure-based subcultures. The symbols used to express these values, however, were different. For example, to express male dominance and aggression, male “headbangers” might wear a studded leather wristband or a leather dog collar around the neck, complete with eight-inch spikes. Mainstream society’s negative reaction toward such symbols created most of the anger and animosity directed at those involved in the subculture (Friesen, 1990; Friesen and Epstein, 1994).

I concluded the study by suggesting that there exists a reciprocal relationship between society and subcultures labeled as deviant. Society benefits from this situation; for example, creators of and listeners to heavy metal music become identifiable groups that are easy to label as deviant, reinforcing the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior and increasing the feeling of moral solidarity and superiority on the part of “normals.” In return, heavy metal creators and listeners (overwhelmingly adolescent at the time) achieved a certain amount of power through fear. Others in society usually avoided eye contact or physical proximity in the streets and malls where headbangers would congregate. This type of personal power felt good to young people who were otherwise controlled by parents, schools, and societal constraints that restricted their freedom of movement, and even their voting and driving privileges.

It should be obvious that the selection of my research topic was something both deeply personal and intellectually interesting. I wanted to know what the heavy metal phenomenon was really all about. It was satisfying to thoroughly research the topic and come to an understanding of the phenomena in a way that made sense, both to me and to the broader academic community. Somewhat surprisingly, most of the heavy metal listeners I spoke with were also very pleased with my finished product. They felt that my research helped their voices be heard and added some reason and legitimacy to their activities. Giving otherwise disenfranchised people a voice is, incidentally, one of the goals of qualitative research (Ragin, 1994).

It should be noted that governments (federal, state, municipal) influence the research process by making research money (called “grants”) available for people who investigate a subject about which government officials want more information. Government agencies advertise a grant competition and take applications from individuals or firms who design a study and offer to conduct the research. Over time, the various actors in this process compile a body of documented research literature on a specific topic, and what we know about a particular topic grows thereby. Most researchers end up specializing in a particular area of research and become well acquainted with other experts in the field and what questions remain unanswered through science.
THINGS TO CONSIDER AS YOUR CLASS CHOOSES A TOPIC

For the class project outlined in this book, your class has the luxury of choosing a topic in which everyone is potentially interested! This is your chance to think big. What questions about human behavior would you like to answer? Is there a topic about which you feel passionate, or curious? Perhaps you’ve recently engaged in an argument of sorts with friends or loved ones. What was the topic? Is it possible to gather information that would help resolve the dispute?

If you review the table of contents in a typical Introduction to Sociology textbook, you’ll get an idea of what kinds of topics sociologists study. Those topics fit the aims of this particular course. The discussion at the end of this chapter helps ensure that the topic selected will be sociologically relevant and researchable in the context of your class.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

The topic you choose to research for this class will obviously be one that is sociologically interesting. This can be tricky. To choose such a topic, you first need to think like a sociologist. You don’t necessarily have to choose sociology as a career or even a major, but getting practice in thinking sociologically exposes you to possible explanations of human behavior that you may not have thought of before. If you can think sociologically, it will make you more of an asset in almost any chosen profession, because you’ll be able to add new perspectives when trying to solve problems.

In truth, thinking sociologically is something you already do. Do you hold opinions, for example, that attitudes or actions differ among groups according to age, or sex, or culture? Do you believe that children who are spanked will generally grow up to be different people from those who are not spanked? Perhaps you have an attitude on the impact of growing up in a wealthy home, compared to a middle-class or even an impoverished one. Human beings regularly form opinions on the impact that shared social experiences have on behaviors or beliefs. That’s thinking sociologically.

Let me illustrate with a hypothetical example from the workplace. Let’s say you’ve noticed that workers in your glass-blowing company are overly nervous and anxious at work. Work is interrupted or slowed down as a result, because the workers have to take time to manage their anxiety or cool down. If you poll most of the foremen and managers in the plant, they might suggest bringing in an expert who can teach the workers stress management techniques. This individual focus would have workers taken out of their work stations for a time to be trained in how to breathe or meditate, in an effort to keep their anxiety at a level that doesn’t negatively affect their productivity.
Designing and Conducting Your First Interview Project

With sociological training, one of the first things to focus on is the social environment in which these people are working. What rules govern how they work? Rules are part of the social environment because they are constructed by social actors to structure activity in a given situation. In this situation, you learn that the workers are expected to work ten hours a day, produce a large number of glass products, and have no breakage. If they do break an item, management insists on deducting the cost of the item from the pay of the worker responsible.

Thinking sociologically, might you suggest solutions to the employee stress problem other than stress management workshops? Can you think of things in the social environment that might be causing a higher stress level for the workers? A sociologist would likely recommend revising the rules of the workplace, such as decreeing shorter work days or longer breaks during the day. Changing the rules about who pays for broken glass would also decrease worker stress because they would not be as worried about breaking and paying for the products they are creating. Permitting a few broken items per week might reduce the stress level among the workers and increase their productivity.

The important point to take from this example is that the problem of productivity may not be something intrinsic to the employees. Employees are indeed experiencing stress, but not because of who they are. The problem is a consequence of their work environment; stress is experienced because the environment includes a variety of factors that induce stress. Understanding the influence of the social environment on the individual is part of the sociological perspective.

Social Problems and Sociological Problems

If you don’t have much practice in thinking sociologically, you might first think of a topic that is considered by most to be a social problem. A social problem is something about society that we would like to change, something that causes people problems but whose roots are based in social, rather than individual, conditions. Poverty, for example, is something most people consider to be a social problem. Most members of society would like to see poverty completely eliminated, though people disagree as to how to go about it. Homelessness (a related problem) becomes a social problem if we as a society ask, “What can we do to eliminate homelessness in the United States?”

Can you think of other social problems that you could conduct research on in your class? Social problems are such that their causes or solutions are social in nature. Raising the legal minimum wage would have the effect of reducing the number of people living in poverty. Thus poverty is a social problem in that it can be reduced by changing the laws or rules of society. Racism, sexism, violence, terrorism, war, and the effects of social stratification are examples of other social problems addressed by sociologists.

As you think sociologically, you might think of a topic that is sociologically interesting but not exactly defined as a social problem. We call this group of topics sociological problems. All social problems are sociological problems, but not all sociological problems are social problems. For example, have you ever wondered what kinds of things influenced