Thinking about Social Phenomena
Constructing Puzzles

Lecture dt. March 26, 2020

The process of research

Ask new questions; revise research designs; choose a falsifiable *theory; collect more data of a different type.*

Keep asking yourself: what evidence will convince me that I am wrong? (King, Keohane and Verba 1994)

Theory: a reasoned speculation about the answer to a research question or puzzle.

The process of research

1. What is your main research question or puzzle? What are the sub-questions?
2. Based on what you have read, what are plausible explanations? On what theories can you form your hypotheses/expectations?
3. What methods can best help you investigate your h/e? What are the advantages and limitations of these methods?
4. Analysis
5. Findings

Challenges: explaining concepts

Concepts are abstractions; unobservable, but useful to help us explain experience.

- Bureaucracy
- Hierarchy
- Discrimination
- Social class
- Panic-buying

Challenges: explaining concepts

The social scientist finds himself in continuous effort to combine two ideals: vision and precision. Clearly, he needs testable precise instruments if he wants to develop testable propositions. But the social world is very complex and doesn't provide us with the well delineated objects from which natural sciences start. Thus, he also needs creative imagination—of vision—to decide on the objects about which such propositions should be developed

--Paul Lazarsfeld (1965) foreword to *Constructive Typology and Social Theory*

How do you measure a concept?

Specify observable indicators. Also called **operationalization**

e.g. poverty → income

quality of a school → student: teacher ratio

discrimination → wage differences; perceptions,
e.g. Perceived Racism Scale (PRS)

panic-buying → Kind of items (orange juice!);
time-frame; who?

What kind of data?

Primary data: That which you produce yourself, through experiments, surveys, interviews, questionnaires
- Pros: you can collect what you want to know
- Cons: time-consuming; ethics

Secondary data: That which is already available, e.g. news reports, large statistical datasets (Census; World Values Survey etc.), historical archives; findings of other scientists
- Pros: readily available, no problem of ethics
- Cons: would not answer all your questions

What kind of data?

Whether qualitative or quantitative,

Credibility of data: how trustworthy is our data

- Validity: accuracy, i.e. to what extent do our measures correspond to the concepts they are intended to reflect
- Reliability: verifiability, i.e. does a measure, applied to the same object, yield the same result each time?
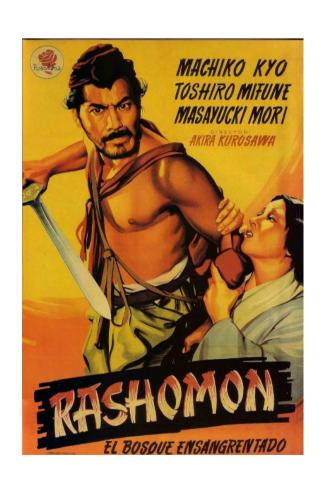
Ethics

- "Do no harm" → physical, emotional, social

Example: official material

Unreliable official information

- Police and politicians across the world have an incentive to under-report crime statistics to portray efficient governance (Wilkinson, 2009)

- Cross-verify across official sources and triangulate with testimonies, newspapers → lots of legwork!

Data quality: interviews

Face-to-face
Respondent bias: attitudinal fallacy, i.e. discrepancy between spoken word and behaviour; social desirability bias
Interviewer bias: effect of biographical characteristics on data quality

Telephonic interviews
- Selection bias: no phone directory; contacts non-random
- Non-response bias: is it serious with mobile phone interviews?
- Loss of non-verbal cues

Avoid

Fitting data to theory
Manipulating data so that your theory is proved correct

Tweaking theory to fit data
What if the data is unreliable?

Draft of puzzle: components

- **The puzzle**: explicitly state the puzzle in one or two sentences; then, in one paragraph explain why you think this is a puzzle. Counterintuitive? Unexplained?

- **Literature review:** Have other social scientists explained similar phenomena? Who? What are their main findings?

- **Hypotheses or expectations:** Based on lit. review, what do you think can plausibly explain the puzzle? Give the theoretical principle/s

- **Methods:** How do you propose to investigate your expectations? Interviews? Survey? Secondary data?

Next week

Interviews and principles of survey methods

How to ask questions; wording effect and threats to validity