

Conducting Sociological Research

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of conducting sociological research through the definition and discussion of:

1. Value-Relevant Research Vs. Value-Free Research
2. Variables and Hypotheses
3. Sampling

1. VALUE-RELEVANT RESEARCH VS. VALUE-FREE RESEARCH

How does the process of sociological knowledge-making occur? How do we evolve from broad questions and interest to actual codified sociological knowledge?

You can begin by looking at two areas of concern with social research that were first identified by German sociologist Max Weber and his famous essay "Objectivity in the Social Sciences": value-relevant research versus value-free research.

Value-relevant research is a recognition that your values guide you to your research topics.

IN CONTEXT

If you're concerned about economic equality in the United States, you might be interested in how wealth and success transfers from generation to generation.

This is an example of how your values orient you in the direction of what you want to study. You're not likely to devote much time to studying something that you don't consider to be valuable or interesting. Weber recognized this tendency in research.

However, you can't simply let your values cloud and bias your research, a notion that ties to the concept of **value-free research**. This concept states that research should be objective. You don't allow the values that originally guided you to your research topics to bias the research itself.

➡ **EXAMPLE** A researcher's concern for the poor in this country compels him to alter his results and bias his research so that it aligns favorably with his values. This contradicts Weber's notion of value-free research--that research should be objective and unclouded by your values.



TERMS TO KNOW

Value-Relevant Research (Max Weber)

An acknowledgment that our values guide us to our research topics; we study what we find valuable and interesting.

Value-Free Research (Max Weber)

Research must be objective and should not be biased by our values, principles, or beliefs.

2. VARIABLES AND HYPOTHESES

Once you've decided on your research questions-- often guided by your values--you will select variables to study and hypotheses to test.

A **variable** is a characteristic, such as your age, class, income level, level of education, or marital status. These characteristics, or variables, vary throughout the population as a whole-- they change and are different for various people, and can be used to study differences between people and groups.

Focusing on particular variables allows you to isolate them in order to analyze their influence and determine what you want to know. A **hypothesis**--commonly known as an 'educated guess,' is a statement or conjecture about how variables are related.

IN CONTEXT

If you are studying the effects of wealth transfer through generations, you might look at how your father's education level relates to your life earnings or income level: How educated is your father? How will that affect your own income later on?

What might you hypothesize about the relation between the two? You might hypothesize that if your father was educated, you're going to have higher life income.

You make a statement about how the variable 'your father's education' was related to the variable 'your income level.' Keep in mind that not all variables are created equal. Some are very critical in explaining your life income level, and some aren't, meaning that they don't strongly relate to the outcome that you're trying to explain--your life income level.

There are two different kinds of variable:

- An **independent variable** is the factor that causes the change, or the outcome. You can think of it as the cause. In the example above, the independent variable is your father's education level. It is what drives the change.
- The **dependent variable** is the effect or the variable that is influenced by the other. In the example, the

dependent variable is your income level. You are hypothesizing that your father's education level affects your income level.



TERMS TO KNOW

Variable

A characteristic such as age, education, income, married, or single that can vary throughout the population.

Hypothesis

Commonly known as an educated guess; a statement about how two or more variables are related.

Independent Variable

The cause of the change, or what drives the change in the dependent variable.

Dependent Variable

The effect of the change.

3. SAMPLING

What happens after you gravitate towards a topic, come up with a hypothesis, and hypothesize a relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable? You need to get a sample of the population as a whole.

A **sample** is a smaller group of subjects that ideally represents the population as a whole. You sample because it is impossible to go and ask everyone in the whole population, so you have to take a slice of the whole population. The goal, then, is to have a representative sample where all facets of interest of the study are included.

IN CONTEXT

In your study about your father's education and your income, you wouldn't have a representative sample if you analyzed data from 100 people with highly educated fathers and two people with fathers who didn't finish high school. How could you make conclusions on just the two? You can't, so you would ideally want an even distribution of 33, 33, and 33, which would give you a more representative sample.



HINT

Representativeness is what you strive for with sampling.

One effective way to get a sample is through a technique called **snowball sampling**. In snowball sampling, you find your initial respondents or subjects through acquaintances that you already have in your network. You then use those acquaintances to find their acquaintances, and so on, and the process snowballs.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sample

A smaller group of subjects that ideally represents the larger population as a whole.

Snowball Sampling

A sampling technique where initial subjects are found through acquaintances, and later subjects are found through acquaintances of acquaintances.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about how values influence research (**value-relevant research**) and the importance of not allowing those values to bias your research--remaining objective when you're conducting your research (**value-free research**)--which are ideas developed by German sociologist Max Weber. You also learned about **variables** (independent and dependent), **hypotheses** and **sampling**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dependent Variable

The effect of the change.

Hypothesis

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Independent Variable

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