Chapter 1

Introduction:
The Tools of Social Science Research

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, students are presented with the concept of empiricism, which serves as the basis for all social science research. Quantitative, deductive empirical research tools are compared to qualitative, inductive research tools. Quantitative tools include surveys, experimentation, and the use of existing data. The empirical tools associated with qualitative research include in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field observation. The differences between hypothesis testing and hypothesis generation are discussed.

THE NATURE AND TOOLS
OF EMPIRICISM

The fundamental difficulty with social science research methods is the terminology that is used to convey esoteric concepts. The aim of this book is to simplify the language of research methods. When discussing social science research methods, we are discussing how to collect information in a scientifically valid way. Now, there are many ways to collect information; however, there are a finite number of ways to do this scientifically. The essence of social science research can be boiled down to one word: empiricism. Empiricism – or to be empirical – means observable through the senses. There are six primary empirical “tools” that are used by social scientists:

1. Surveys
2. Interviews
3. Focus Groups
4. Field Observation
5. Experimentation
6. Existing Data

1. Surveys

Surveys consist of closed ended questions that typically provide the respondent with predetermined option choices. Surveys are considered to be “quantitative” in nature. This is because the option choices can be given a numerical designation, even if the choices are words. When words are given a numerical designation this is called coding.

Example 1: How would you rate the quality of your research methods professor?
The Tools of Social Science Research

2. In-Depth Interviews

In contrast to surveys, in-depth interview questions are open-ended and they are presented more broadly than survey questions. In-depth interview questions can be described as being more qualitative in nature. While closed-ended survey responses can be easily coded into numbers, this is not the case with open-ended interview questions because they provide such an abundance of information that is not easily reduced to numbers.

Example 4: Tell me about the quality of your research methods professor? Describe what your professor does well? Describe what your professor needs to improve?

With interview questions, emphasis is placed on encouraging respondents to speak freely. Storytelling and providing examples are key to this empirical tool. Opportunities for follow-up questions typically present themselves, and this allows the researcher to probe further based on the comments of the interview respondent.

Example 5:

Researcher: Tell me about the quality of your research methods professor?
Student: He has a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but at times he moves too fast.
Researcher: What do you mean when you say he moves too fast?
Student: He’ll explain a concept and move to another even if we still have questions.

From this short interview exchange, you can see that the purpose of interviews is to draw out stories and experiences that encapsulate the basis of the question at hand. If “quality of teaching” is the emphasis of an interview question, then you want to ask follow-up questions and draw out experiences that touch on this. From this exchange, the researcher is already given a sense of what is positive and negative about this professor’s teaching style. The positive being his energy and the negative being the pace at which he moves and
Related Content

Applications of Nano Technology in Civil Engineering: A Review
[www.igi-global.com/article/applications-of-nano-technology-in-civil-engineering/196604?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/applications-of-nano-technology-in-civil-engineering/196604?camid=4v1a)

Building Collaborative Ontologies: A Human Factors Approach
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/building-collaborative-ontologies/119829?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/building-collaborative-ontologies/119829?camid=4v1a)

Formation of an Effective Multi-Functional Model of the Research Competence of Students
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/formation-of-an-effective-multi-functional-model-of-the-research-competence-of-students/196463?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/formation-of-an-effective-multi-functional-model-of-the-research-competence-of-students/196463?camid=4v1a)

Disaster Management in High Risk Regions: A Case Study of the Indian Himalayas Region
[www.igi-global.com/article/disaster-management-in-high-risk-regions/243669?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/disaster-management-in-high-risk-regions/243669?camid=4v1a)