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Designing social research: key elements

Why is it important to have a good research design?

"Things must be done decently and in order"

[The Adventure of the Retired Colourman]

Designing your research (1)

A research design contains (not always in this order):

- research topic / problem
- research question (What…? How…? Why…?)

  or

- research objective (I want to explain…/ understand…/ predict…)*
- literature review [make this relevant to your question but don't ignore relevant older literature]
- research strategies, or what sort of reasoning(s) you will use (e.g. inductive/ deductive/ interpretive…)*

Designing your research (2)

- theoretical framework / hypothesis (may change as your work proceeds)*

- structure of study (Case study? Large sample? Comparative? Experimental?)

- sources of data, types of data*

- data collection methods*

- budget (not just money, also time)

- strengths & limitations of your approach (what can you answer and what can you *not* answer)

  A research design is <u>not</u> a research proposal -- it is a roadmap

Research objectives

Research objectives shape the scope of your study – they provide you with direction. They lead to your research questions.

Your objective(s) could be to:

- Describe
- Explain
- Understand (why different from "explain" according to Weber?)
- Predict
- Evaluate the social / economic impact of…
- Change

Several of these can go into a single research project

Research strategies

Provide the logic by which research questions are answered, e.g.:

- Inductive

  From collection of specific data to pattern-recognition and generalization

  [Correlational statistical studies are often inductive in their logic; case studies too]

- Deductive

  From general principles to specific hypotheses; then collect data to test that hypothesis

  [Experimental research designs are typically deductive in their logic]

- Interpretive

  From accounts of reality as seen / constructed by social actors to the language of (social) scientific discourse

1. Combination of strategies can go into a single project -- *not always possible in parallel but usually possible in sequence*
2. Specific strategies more or less amenable to specific data collection methods

Theories & hypotheses

- (Nearly) ALL empirical research methods are theory-laden
- Social theories contribute (1) working concepts / units of analysis, (2) broad frameworks or (3) specific hypotheses

- Inductive and (some) interpretive research strategies can generate theory
- Deductive strategies can't generate theories but can test them
- "Hypotheses" posit relationships (correlative, causal…) between 2 or more variables (you can test hypotheses & then reject/ not reject/ *maybe* suggest how to modify existing theories)
- Not all (qualitative) social research projects need explicit hypotheses but most have implicit ones in them
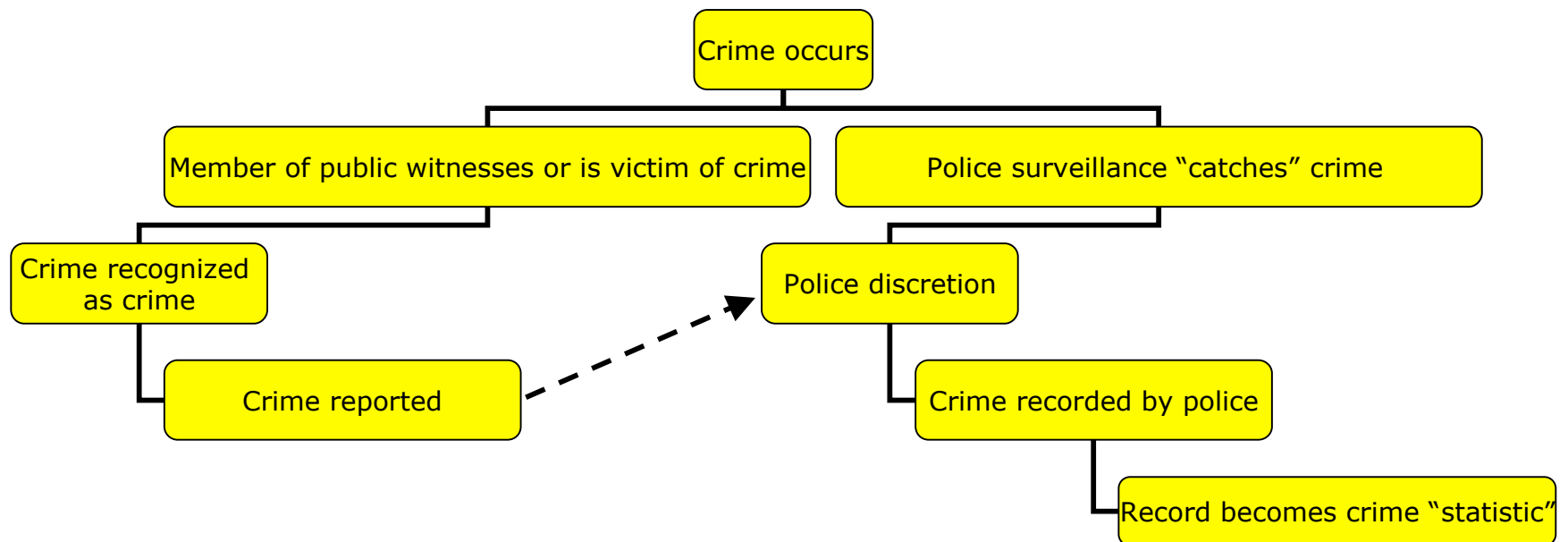
Sources and types of data

- Data comes from individuals, small groups (schools), or large dispersed groups (cities, national groups)
- Sampling: a way to select the people or units from whom the data will come
- Random sampling: the only way to generate <u>statistically representative</u> findings

- Specific data-collection sites are appropriate for specific data-collection methods:
  1. Natural social settings (e.g. participant-observation / ethnography)
  2. Semi-natural settings (e.g. interviewing, surveys)
  3. Artificial settings (e.g. experiments / games)
  4. Artifacts (things / archival information / text)

- Forms of data:
  Qualitative or Quantitative (This is a "traditional" distinction but boundary is often unclear)
  Primary or Secondary ("Raw" data versus already-processed data)

Always remember that data is produced, it's not "out there"

Crime occurs

Member of public witnesses or is victim of crime

Police surveillance "catches" crime

Crime recognized as crime

Police discretion

Crime reported

Crime recorded by police

Record becomes crime "statistic"

Adapted from Bryman 2001

Finally…

- *There are some issues that are unique to <u>social </u>science research*

- *Relationship* of researcher to researched:
  Detached observer? (classical "scientific" stance)
  Empathetic observer? (post Weber)
  Mediator of 'languages'? (interpretation)
  Partner in empowerment? (critical theory / action research)

- *Ethics*: protecting subjects, being decent & accountable in the field

- *Representing* "your" community in your publications

We'll now move on to the three most common methods of data collection in the social sciences
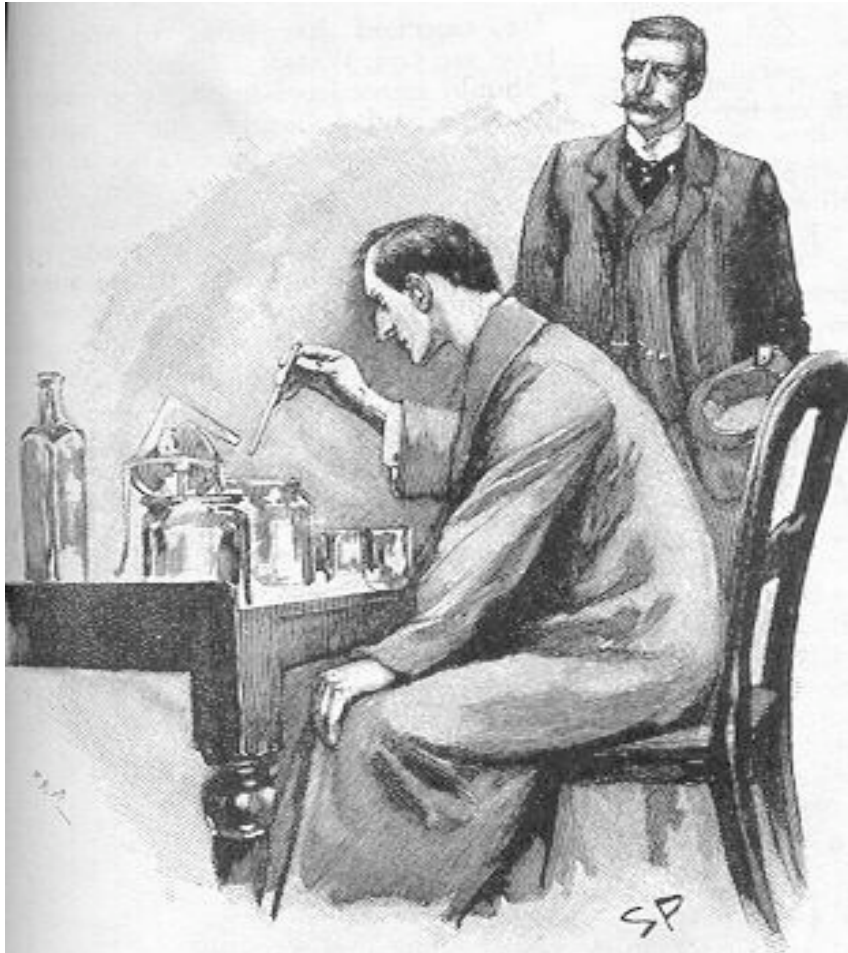
"Data! Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay"

[Adventure of the Copper Beeches]