Human Inquiry and Science

The Basics of Social Research
Chapter 1
Babbie
Errors in Inquiry and Some Solutions

The Challenges of Social Science Research
In order to properly study any complex social phenomenon it is important to avoid all of the following common analytical mistakes:

1) Inaccurate Observations
2) Overgeneralization
3) Selective Observation
4) Illogical Reasoning

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Errors in Inquiry

Inaccurate Observations (9)
Most of our observations are “casual” or inadvertent. Few are very focused or detailed in nature, unless we make a conscious effort to remember or record the details of a particular event or situation.

Consequently, our recollections of what we have seen or experienced are rarely that accurate.

Science: Conscious Observation
Scientific analysis, by contrast, is a conscious effort to record the details in order to identify certain trends or patterns of behavior.
Errors in Inquiry

Overgeneralization (8)

Once we begin to look for or think about patterns of behavior, we run the risk of believing a pattern exists based on limited information or observations, when in fact no such pattern actually exists.

Specifically, we “assume that a few similar events are evidence of a general pattern.”

Example:
Observation: All my friends in College are voting for Nader.
Overgeneralization: Most College students support Nader.
Science: Sample Size and Replication

Scientific inquiry attempts to avoid the dangers of overgeneralization by using larger, and randomly selected sample sizes.

Examples:
Observation: All my friends in College are voting for Nader.
Generalization: The Majority of Students at Suffolk support Nader, based on a randomly selected sample of students.

Replication:
We can also reduce the risk of overgeneralization by repeating a study to see if it produces similar results.
Errors in Inquiry

Selective Observation
If we do not check our own tendencies toward overgeneralization (again, see patterns based on limited observation or evidence), then we run the risk of focusing only on events that we believe conform to the pattern we see.

Example:
Overgeneralization: Revolutions tend to follow Invasions.
Selective Observation: Examine countries where there was an Invasion and a Revolution.
Errors in Inquiry

Illogical Reasoning
Whenever we make claims without any consideration for rational explanation or evidence we are in jeopardy of not only being inaccurate but illogical.

Example: Gambler’s Fallacy
A string of either good or bad luck suggests an inevitable reversal of fortune.

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Views of Reality

What is Reality?
As some of the errors of inquiry we just examine indicate, we often think that what is “real” is quite obvious, but we soon discover that making claims about what is real about the social world, for example, is more difficult than expected.
Competing Views of Reality:
They include:

1) Pre-Modern
2) Modern
3) Post-Modern
Views of Reality

Pre-Modern
Based on an implicit faith in what is observed or believed. The world is as it is seen and experienced. Hence, there is only one reality. It is a view that affords little room for competing points of view.

Modernist
Acknowledges that there are differing interpretations of reality, but still believes that there is a real external world.

Post-Modern
Challenges the idea of an uniform, external reality. Asserts instead that our “experiences” and understanding of what is real are in fact limited to our interpretations.