

Social scientists use a variety of sources of information to gather information. These include primary and secondary sources. **Primary sources** or research is essentially first hand or field research that a social scientist conducts using tools and methods including surveys, content analysis, experiments, interviews, observations and participant observation. **Secondary sources** include journal or newspaper articles, books and texts that summarize and report what others have to say about a topic or issue (De Coeur, Rawes, and Warecki, 2012). Other sources such as municipal records or government statistics can be used to provide additional information. Sometimes this is data that was collected for another purpose but that can be used in a new way by the researcher (secondary analysis) (Holloway, Holloway and Witte, 2010).

Social scientists often make use of officially gathered statistics found through census compilation to find out about birth rates, deaths, employment, poverty rates, crime, and so on (De Coeur, Rawes, and Warecki, 2012). In Canada the main sources of this information are Statistics Canada and Canadian research based organizations interested in social trends and phenomena. These statistics give social science researchers a chance to examine social trends and understand society. Government policies are often influenced by these sources of information.

Quantitative versus Qualitative Methods

Research methods fall into these two types.

Quantitative methods are those that can be quantified or measured numerically. Data is gathered from a number of people that can be analyzed to describe, explain or predict patterns for groups. These methods result in statistics which can be used to understand people in society by examining the behaviour of a sample group. These include experiments, surveys, content analysis and secondary analysis (see above).

Qualitative methods are more descriptive and detailed in nature. Comprehensive or specific information is gathered from individuals to help the researcher understand their behaviour. Variations between respondents can be expected. These include interviews and observations.

Surveys

In surveys, the researcher develops and distributes questionnaires to sample groups who are thought to be representative of the larger group that is being studied. For example if a researcher is interested in the dating practices of teens, the sample group should include a good cross sample of teens.

The questions are usually closed ended such as true and false or multiple choice - where the answers are provided and the respondents select the closest response. Survey questions should be straight forward, objective, and relevant.

Keep in mind that you want to prove your hypothesis using the answers provided, when designing your questions.



Content Analysis

In content analysis, the researcher examines and classifies content in a sample group of communications such as books, letters, movies, songs or television commercials. Variables that are being analyzed are determined before conducting the research. An example of content analysis is counting the number of instances of gender stereotyping in a specific cartoon.



Experiments

In an experiment, relationships between variables are examined. An **independent variable** is a factor or variable that can not be changed and stands on its own; a **dependent variable** is a factor or variable that can change depending on other factors. A researcher conducting an experiment compares independent and dependent variables after some form of change or manipulation. Typically there are two sample groups used, a **control group** and an **experimental group**. The variable being studied is manipulated with the experimental group but not the control group. The behaviour of both groups are measured, observed and compared. To be valid, the effects of the variable being studied should only be evident in the experimental group.

For example a researcher may want to examine whether or not loud music affects the ability to solve puzzles. The independent variable or factor would be the playing of loud music – it doesn't change it just is as a factor present or not. The experimental group would try to solve puzzles with loud music playing. The control group would solve the same puzzles without music playing. Any change in performance is the dependent variable. The experimental group should perform differently than the control group if there is an effect of loud music on puzzle solving.



Secondary Analysis

In secondary analysis, the researcher examines data that has already been gathered for another purpose, in order to gain evidence that can apply to his or her own investigation. For example, a researcher could look at school attendance records to investigate the hypothesis “senior students are more likely than juniors to miss school on Fridays.” Social scientists often use secondary analysis of population data as it is data that is available and ready to use.

Interviews

In interviews, the researcher asks the subject to describe and explain his or her behaviour and or opinions. Interviews allow researchers to gather important information from individuals, such as professionals and experts in a field of interest.

The interviewer may ask direct questions to draw out detailed information about a topic under investigation. The questions are usually open ended and allow for the subject to provide detailed and in depth information. Interviews also allow for clarification for both the subject and the interviewer on any of the questions or answers. Interview questions should be straight forward, objective, and relevant. They should be about past behaviour or current knowledge or attitudes and not expect the subject to speculate about what they may or may not do in a given situation.

Keep in mind that you want to prove your hypothesis using the answers provided, when designing your questions.

***DYK?** In a research report or essay you can cite an interview that takes place by phone or email directly in the body of the paper (Smith, personal communication, September 16, 2012). This appears in the essay but not on the reference page.*

Participant Observation

Sometimes the researcher is part of the group he or she is studying or becomes part of the group in order to be in a position to make observations. This method allows the researcher to gain first hand information about an issue, behaviours or situation.

Cultural anthropologist Parin Dossa was interested in studying the behaviour of Muslim women in Canada post 9/11 to see how and if they were affected by prejudice (Bain, Colyer, Des Rivieres and Dolan, 2002). She spent time in the community and attended social gatherings and functions. She was able to discover a lot about the immigrant women she was studying by spending time with them.

Observations

In observations, the researcher observes and records the behaviour of various subjects. Researchers may develop charts to help organize the findings as they are watching and recording.

***FYI** It is unethical to video tape people for research without their knowledge or consent. However, with consent, photos and video recordings are playing an increasing role in social science research.*