Chapter 1: Science, Society, and Social Research

Lecture Outline

I. Errors in Everyday Reasoning
   a. Errors in Observation
      i. Selective observation: Choosing to look only at things that are in line with our own preferences or beliefs
      ii. Inaccurate observation: Thinking that we have seen something that is not true
   b. Overgeneralization: concluding that what was observed or what is known to be true for some cases is true for all cases
   c. Illogical reasoning: prematurely jumping to conclusions or arguing on the basis of invalid assumptions
   d. Resistance to change: reluctance to change ideas even in light of new information. May occur because of:
      i. Ego-based commitments: inability to admit we’re mistaken in earlier conclusions
      ii. Excessive devotion to tradition: when too much skepticism stifles our adaptation to changing circumstances.
      iii. Uncritical agreement with authority: when we don’t critically evaluate the ideas of those in positions of authority.

II. The Logic of Science
   a. Science: a set of logical, systematic, documented methods for investigating nature and natural processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations
   b. Social Science: The use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations
   c. Pseudoscience: Claims presented so that they appear scientific, even though they lack supporting evidence and plausibility

III. Motives for social research
   a. Policy guidance or program management (e.g., government decisions or planning)
   b. Academic concerns (e.g., testing social theory)
   c. Personal interest

IV. Four types of social research
   a. Descriptive Research: research that defines and describes social phenomena (e.g., National Geographic “Survey 2000” that described Internet users around the world and identified differences between countries)
   b. Exploratory Research: investigation of social phenomena without expectations (e.g., electronic diabetes newsgroups were found to also be
support and information networks, a place where information could be assimilated to inform choices)
c.  *Explanatory Research:* research that identifies causes and effects of social phenomena (e.g., research that suggests that Internet use hurts or helps other forms of social interaction.)
d.  *Evaluation Research:* research that determines the effects of a social program or other type of intervention (e.g., in the Toronto, Ont. suburb that was wired with the Internet, universal Internet access increased relations between residents)

V. Qualitative and Quantitative Orientations to Research
a.  *Quantitative methods:* data collection methods such as surveys and experiments that record variation in social life in terms of categories that vary in amount
   i.  Data are numbers OR attributes that can be ordered in terms of magnitude
   ii. Most often used for explanation, description, and evaluation
b.  *Qualitative methods:* data collection methods such as participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher
   i.  Data are mostly written or spoken words or observations
   ii. Data do not have a direct numerical interpretation
   iii. Exploration is the most often motive for using qualitative methods
c.  *Triangulation:* The use of multiple methods to study one research question

VI. Basic Science vs. Applied Research
a.  *Basic Science:* The effort to figure out what the world is like and why it works as it does; also known as “academic motivations.”
b.  *Applied Research:* Evaluation research and other social research; often motivated by practical concerns.

VII. Positivist or Interpretivist Philosophies
a. Our investigations of the social world are shaped by our general assumptions about how the social world can best be investigated.
   i. This is known as our personal “social research philosophy.”
b. Two of the most common approaches to conducting research are “Positivist” and “Postpositivist.”
   i.  *Positivism:* The belief that there is a reality that exists apart from our own perception of it, that it can be understood through observation, and that it follows general laws.
   ii.  *Postpositivism:* The belief that there is an empirical reality, but that our understanding of it is limited by its complexity and by the biases and other limitations of researchers.
   iii.  *Intersubjective agreement:* an agreement by different observers on what is happening in the natural or social world.
c. Both positivist and postpositivist philosophies avoid value considerations (personal opinions), because value considerations are beyond the scope of science.
   i. They are considered a legitimate basis for selecting a research problem to investigate, but during the research project, value considerations are to be put aside.

VIII. Interpretivist and Constructivist Philosophies
a. Qualitative research is often guided by interpretivist philosophies, rather than positivist.
   i. Interpretivism: The belief that reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to that reality.

b. The “constructivist paradigm” is an extension of interpretivist philosophy.
   i. Constructivist paradigm: A perspective that emphasizes how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs.

IX. Strengths and Limitations of Social Research
a. Strengths
   i. Helps overcome errors of everyday reasoning
   ii. Permits us to see more, observe with fewer distortions, and describe more clearly what our opinions are based on
   iii. One research study often leads to another, and another, and another, thus accumulating more knowledge of the social world
   iv. By designing new studies that focus on the weaker points or controversial conclusions of past studies, social science expands our knowledge about the social world

b. Limitations
   i. Findings are always subject to differing interpretations.
   ii. Other researchers may find different results
   iii. Social phenomena are complex; one study will not necessarily capture everything