

Glossary

Abduction

A form of reasoning with strong ties with induction that grounds social scientific accounts of social worlds in the perspectives and meanings of participants in those social worlds.

Action research

An approach in which the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis.

Ad libitum sampling

A sampling approach in structured observation whereby whatever is happening at the moment that observation is due to occur is recorded.

Adjacency pair

The tendency for certain kinds of activity in talk to be characterized by linked phases.

Analytic induction

An approach to the analysis of qualitative data in which the researcher seeks universal explanations of phenomena by pursuing the collection of data until no cases that are inconsistent with a hypothetical explanation (deviant or negative cases) of a phenomenon are found.

Arithmetic mean

Also known simply as the mean, this is the everyday average—namely, the total of a distribution of values divided by the number of values.

Asynchronous online interview or focus group

Online interviews may be asynchronous or synchronous. In the case of the former, the transactions between participants are not in real time, so that there may be long spaces of time between interviewers' questions and participants' replies, and, in the case of focus groups, between participants' contributions to the discussion.

Attached email questionnaire survey

A survey in which respondents are sent a questionnaire, which is received as an attachment by email. Compare with embedded email survey.

Behaviour sampling

A sampling approach in structured observation whereby an entire group is watched and the observer records who was involved in a particular kind of behaviour.

Biographical method

Also often referred to as the life history method, this method emphasizes the inner experience of individuals and its connections with changing events and phases throughout the life course. The method usually entails life history interviews and the use of personal documents as data.

Bivariate analysis

The examination of the relationship between two variables, as in contingency tables or correlation.

CAQDAS

An abbreviation of Computer-Assisted (or -Aided) Qualitative Data Analysis.

Case study

A research design that entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case. The term is sometimes extended to include the study of just two or three cases for comparative purposes.

Category

In grounded theory, a category occupies a space between a researcher's initial theoretical reflections on and understanding of his or her data and a concept, which is viewed as a higher level of abstraction. Thus, a category has an intermediate position in terms of abstraction between coding and a theory.

Causality

A concern with establishing causal connections between variables, rather than mere relationships between them.

Cell

The point in a table, such as a contingency table, where the rows and columns intersect.

Census

The enumeration of an entire population. Unlike a sample, which comprises a count of some units in a population, a census relates to all units in a population. Thus, if a postal questionnaire is mailed to every person in a town or to all members of a profession, the research should be characterized as a census.

Chi-square test

Chi-square is a test of statistical significance, which is typically employed to establish how confident we can be that the findings displayed in a contingency table can be generalized from a probability sample to a population.

Closed question

A question employed in an interview schedule or self-completion questionnaire that presents the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from. Also called fixed-choice question and pre-coded question.

Cluster sample

A sampling procedure in which at an initial stage the researcher samples areas (i.e. clusters) and then samples units from these clusters, usually using a probability sampling method.

Code, coding

In quantitative research, codes act as tags that are placed on data about people or other units of analysis. The aim is to assign the data relating to each variable to groups, each of which is considered to be a category of the variable in question. Numbers are then assigned to each category to allow the information to be processed by the computer. In qualitative research, coding is the process whereby data are broken down into component parts, which are given names.

Coding frame

A listing of the codes used in relation to the analysis of data. In relation to answers to a structured interview schedule or questionnaire, the coding frame will delineate the categories used in connection with each question. It is particularly crucial in relation to the coding of open questions. With closed questions, the coding frame is essentially incorporated into the pre-given answers, hence the frequent use of the term pre-coded question to describe such questions.

Coding manual

In content analysis, this is the statement of instructions to coders that outlines all the possible categories for each dimension being coded.

Coding schedule

In content analysis, this is the form onto which all the data relating to an item being coded will be entered.

Comparative design

A research design that entails the comparison of two or more cases in order to illuminate existing theory or generate theoretical insights as a result of contrasting findings uncovered through the comparison.

Concept

A name given to a grouping of phenomena that organizes observations and ideas by virtue of their possessing common features. In grounded theory, a concept is a key building block in the construction of a theory.

Concurrent validity

One of the main approaches to establishing measurement validity. It entails relating a measure to a criterion on which cases (e.g. people) are known to differ and that is relevant to the concept in question.

Confounding variable

A variable that is related to each of two variables the result of which is to produce the appearance of a relationship between the two variables. Such a relationship is a spurious relationship.

Connotation

A term used in semiotics to refer to the principal and most manifest meaning of a sign. Compare with denotation.

Constant

An attribute in terms of which cases do not differ. Compare with variable.

Constant comparison

A central tool of grounded theory that entails constantly comparing new data with existing data, concepts, and categories. It also entails comparing categories with each other and categories with concepts.

Constructionism, constructionist

An ontological position (often also referred to as constructivism) that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It is antithetical to objectivism.

Content analysis

An approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner. The term is sometimes used in connection with qualitative research as well—see qualitative content analysis.

Contingency table

A table, comprising rows and columns, that shows the relationship between two variables. Usually, at least one of the variables is a nominal variable. Each cell in the table shows the frequency of occurrence of that intersection of categories of each of the two variables and usually a percentage.

Continuous recording

A procedure in structured observation whereby observation occurs for extended periods so that the frequency and duration of certain types of behaviour can be carefully recorded.

Control group

Sometimes used in experiments, which involves a research design that rules out alternative causal explanations of findings deriving from it (i.e. possesses internal validity) by having at least (a) an experimental group, which is exposed to a treatment, and a control group, which is not.

Convenience sample

A sample that is selected because of its availability to the researcher. It is a form of non-probability sample.

Conversation analysis

The fine-grained analysis of talk as it occurs in interaction in naturally occurring situations. The talk is recorded and transcribed so that the detailed analyses can be carried out. The analysis is concerned with uncovering the underlying structures of talk in interaction and as such with the achievement of order through interaction. Conversation analysis is grounded in ethnomethodology.

Correlation

An approach to the analysis of relationships between interval/ratio variables and/or ordinal variables that seeks to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables concerned. Pearson's r and Spearman's ρ are both methods for assessing the level of correlation between variables.

Covert research

A term frequently used in connection with ethnographic research in which the researcher does not reveal his or her true identity. Such research violates the ethical principle of informed consent.

Cramér's V

A method for assessing the strength of the relationship between two variables, at least one of which must have more than two categories.

Critical discourse analysis

A form of discourse analysis that emphasizes the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change. It draws in particular on the theories and approaches of Foucault.

Critical realism

A realist epistemology that asserts that the study of the social world should be concerned with the identification of the structures that generate that world. Critical realism is critical because its practitioners aim to identify structures in order to change them, so that inequalities and injustices may be counteracted. Unlike a positivist epistemology, critical realism accepts that the structures that are identified may not be amenable to the senses. Thus, whereas positivism is empiricist, critical realism is not.

Cross-sectional design

A research design that entails the collection of data on more than one case (usually quite a lot more than one) and at a single point in time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables (usually many more than two), which are then examined to detect patterns of association.

Deductive, deduction

An approach to the relationship between theory and research in which the latter is conducted with reference to hypotheses and ideas inferred from the former. Compare with inductive.

Denotation

A term used in semiotics to refer to the meanings of a sign associated with the social context within which it operates that are supplementary to and less immediately apparent than its connotation.

Dependent variable

A variable that is causally influenced by another variable (i.e. an independent variable).

Diary

A term that in the context of social research methods can mean different things. Three types of diary can be distinguished: diaries written or completed at the behest of a researcher; personal diaries that can be analysed as a personal document, but that were produced spontaneously; and diaries written by social researchers as a log of their activities and reflections.

Dichotomous variable

A variable with just two categories.

Dimension

Refers to an aspect of a concept.

Discourse analysis

An approach to the analysis of talk and other forms of discourse that emphasizes the ways in which versions of reality are accomplished through language.

Distribution of values

A term used to refer to the entire data relating to a variable. Thus, the ages of members of a sample represent the distribution of values for that variable for that sample.

Ecological fallacy

The error of assuming that inferences about individuals can be made from findings relating to aggregate data.

Ecological validity

A concern with the question of whether social scientific findings are applicable to people's everyday, natural social settings.

Embedded email questionnaire survey

A social survey in which respondents are sent an email that contains a questionnaire. Compare with attached email survey.

Empiricism

An approach to the study of reality that suggests that only knowledge gained through experience and the senses is acceptable.

Epistemology, epistemological

A theory of knowledge. It is particularly employed in this book to refer to a stance on what should pass as acceptable knowledge. See positivism, realism, and interpretivism.

Eta

A test of the strength of the relationship between two variables. The independent variable must be a nominal variable and the dependent variable must be an interval variable or ratio variable. The resulting level of correlation will always be positive.

Ethnographic content analysis

An approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts. There is an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared.

Ethnography, ethnographer

Like participant observation, a research method in which the researcher immerses him- or herself in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions. However, the term has a more inclusive sense than participant observation, which seems to emphasize the observational component. Also, the term 'an ethnography' is frequently used to refer to the written output of ethnographic research.

Ethnomethodology

A sociological perspective concerned with the way in which social order is accomplished through talk and interaction. It provides the intellectual foundations of conversation analysis.

Evaluation research

Research that is concerned with the evaluation of real-life interventions in the social world.

Experiment

A research design that rules out alternative causal explanations of findings deriving from it (i.e. possesses internal validity) by having at least (a) an experimental group, which is exposed to a treatment, and a control group, which is not, and (b) random assignment to the two groups. Instead of a control group, an experiment may comprise a further group (or groups) that are exposed to other treatments.

External validity

A concern with the question of whether the results of a study can be generalized beyond the specific research context in which it was conducted.

Face validity

A concern with whether an indicator appears to reflect the content of the concept in question.

Facilitator

The person who guides the questioning of a focus group. Also called a moderator.

Factor analysis

A statistical technique used for large numbers of variables to establish whether there is a tendency for groups of them to be inter-related. It is often used with multiple-indicator measures to see if the indicators tend to bunch to form one or more groups of indicators. These groups of indicators are called factors and must then be given a name.

Field notes

A detailed chronicle by an ethnographer of events, conversations, and behaviour, and the researcher's initial reflections on them.

Field stimulation

A study in which the researcher directly intervenes in and/or manipulates a natural setting in order to observe what happens as a consequence of that intervention.

Focal sampling

A sampling approach in structured observation whereby a sampled individual is observed for a set period of time. The observer records all examples of whatever forms of behaviour are of interest.

Focus group

A form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the emphasis is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning.

Frequency table

A table that displays the number and/or percentage of units (e.g. people) in different categories of a variable.

Generalization, generalizability

A concern with the external validity of research findings.

Grounded theory

An iterative approach to the analysis of qualitative data that aims to generate theory out of research data by achieving a close fit between the two.

Hermeneutics

A term drawn from theology, which, when imported into the social sciences, is concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action. It emphasizes the need to understand from the perspective of the social actor.

Hypothesis

An informed speculation, which is set up to be tested, about the possible relationship between two or more variables.

Independent variable

A variable that has a causal impact on another variable (i.e. a dependent variable).

Index

A term that is usually used interchangeably with scale to refer to a multiple-indicator measure in which the score a person gives for each component indicator is used to provide a composite score for that person.

Indicator

A measure that is employed to refer to a concept when no direct measure is available.

Inductive, induction

An approach to the relationship between theory and research in which the former is generated out of the latter. Compare with deductive.

Informed consent

A key principle in social research ethics. It implies that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study.

Inter-coder reliability

The degree to which two or more individuals agree about the coding of an item. Inter-coder reliability is likely to be an issue in content analysis, structured observation, and when coding answers to open questions in research based on questionnaires or structured interviews.

Internal reliability

The degree to which the indicators that make up a scale are consistent.

Internal validity

A concern with the question of whether a finding that incorporates a causal relationship between two or more variables is sound.

Internet survey

A very general term used to include any social survey conducted online. As such, it includes the Web survey and the attached email survey and the embedded email survey.

Interpretative repertoire

A collection of linguistic resources that are drawn upon in order to characterize and assess actions and events.

Interpretivism

An epistemological position that requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action.

Interval variable

A variable where the distances between the categories are identical across its range of categories.

Intervening variable

A variable that is affected by another variable and that in turn has a causal impact on another variable. Taking an intervening variable into account often facilitates the understanding of the relationship between two variables.

Interview guide

A rather vague term that is used to refer to the brief list of memory prompts of areas to be covered that is often employed in unstructured interviewing or to the somewhat more structured list of issues to be addressed or questions to be asked in semi-structured interviewing.

Interview schedule

A collection of questions designed to be asked by an interviewer. An interview schedule is always used in a structured interview.

Intra-coder reliability

The degree to which an individual differs over time in the coding of an item. Intra-coder reliability is likely to be an issue in content analysis, structured observation, and when coding answers to open questions in research based on questionnaires or structured interviews.

Key informant

Someone who offers the researcher, usually in the context of conducting an ethnography, perceptive information about the social setting, important events, and individuals.

Life history interview

Similar to the oral history interview, but the aim of this type of unstructured interview is to glean information on the entire biography of each respondent.

Life history method

Also often referred to as the biographical method, this method emphasizes the inner experience of individuals and its connections with changing events and phases throughout the life course. The method usually entails life history interviews and the use of personal documents as data.

Likert scale

A widely used format developed by Rensis Likert for asking attitude questions. Respondents are typically asked their degree of agreement with a series of statements that together form a multiple-indicator or -item measure. The scale is deemed then to measure the intensity with which respondents feel about an issue.

Longitudinal research

A research design in which data are collected on a sample (of people, documents, etc.) on at least two occasions.

Mail questionnaire

Traditionally, this term has been synonymous with the postal questionnaire, but with the arrival of email-based questionnaires (see embedded email survey and attached email survey), many writers prefer to refer to postal rather than mail questionnaires.

Mean

Also known as the arithmetic mean, this is the everyday average—namely, the total of a distribution of values divided by the number of values.

Measure of central tendency

A statistic, like the arithmetic mean, median, or mode, that summarizes a distribution of values.

Measure of dispersion

A statistic, like the range or standard deviation, that summarizes the amount of variation in a distribution of values.

Measurement validity

The degree to which a measure of a concept truly reflects that concept. See also face validity and concurrent validity.

Median

The mid-point in a distribution of values.

Meta-analysis

A form of systematic review that involves summarizing the results of a large number of quantitative studies and conducting various analytical tests to show whether or not a particular variable has an effect across the studies.

Meta-ethnography

A form of systematic review that is used to achieve interpretative synthesis of qualitative research and other secondary sources, thus providing a counterpart to meta-analysis in quantitative research. It can be used to synthesize and analyse information about a phenomenon that has been extensively studied.

Missing data

Data relating to a case that are not available —for example, when a respondent in social survey research does not answer a question. These are referred to as ‘missing values’ in SPSS.

Mixed methods research

A term that is increasingly employed to describe research that combines the use of both quantitative research and qualitative research. The term can be employed to describe research that combines just quantitative research methods or that combines just qualitative research methods. However, in recent times, it has taken on this more specific meaning of combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Mode

The value that occurs most frequently in a distribution of values.

Moderated relationship

A relationship between two variables is said to be moderated when it holds for one category of a third variable but not for another category or other categories.

Moderator

The person who guides the questioning of a focus group. Also called a facilitator.

Multiple-indicator measure

A measure that employs more than one indicator to measure a concept.

Multivariate analysis

The examination of relationships between three or more variables.

Narrative analysis

An approach to the elicitation and analysis of data that is sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as tellers of stories about their lives or events around them, detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts. However, the approach is not exclusive to a focus on life histories.

Narrative review

An approach to reviewing the literature that is often contrasted nowadays with a systematic review. It tends to be less focused than a systematic review and seeks to arrive at a critical interpretation of the literature that it covers.

Naturalism

A confusing term that has at least three distinct meanings: a commitment to adopting the principles of natural scientific method; being true to the nature of the phenomenon being investigated; and a style of research that seeks to minimize the intrusion of artificial methods of data collection.

Negative relationship

A relationship between two variables, whereby as one increases the other decreases.

Nominal variable

Also known as a categorical variable, this is a variable that comprises categories that cannot be rank ordered.

Non-manipulable variable

A variable that cannot readily be manipulated either for practical or for ethical reasons and that therefore cannot be employed in an experiment.

Non-probability sample

A sample that has not been selected using a random sampling method. Essentially, this implies that some units in the population are more likely to be selected than others.

Non-response

A source of non-sampling error that occurs whenever some members of a sample refuse to cooperate, cannot be contacted, or for some reason cannot supply the required data.

Non-sampling error

Differences between the population and the sample that arise either from deficiencies in the sampling approach, such as an inadequate sampling frame or non-response, or from problems such as poor question wording, poor interviewing, or flawed processing of data.

Null hypothesis

A hypothesis of no relationship between two variables.

NVivo

A CAQDAS package that facilitates the management and analysis of qualitative data.

Objectivism

An ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors. Compare with constructionism.

Observation schedule

A device used in structured observation that specifies the categories of behaviour that are to be observed and how behaviour should be allocated to those categories.

Official statistics

Statistics compiled by or on behalf of state agencies in the course of conducting their business.

Ontology, ontological

A theory of the nature of social entities. See objectivism and constructionism.

Open question

A question employed in an interview schedule or self-completion questionnaire that does not present the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from. Compare with closed question.

Operational definition

The definition of a concept in terms of the operations to be carried out when measuring it.

Operationism, operationalism

A doctrine, mainly associated with a version of physics, that emphasizes the search for operational definitions of concepts.

Oral history interview

A largely unstructured interview in which the respondent is asked to recall events from his or her past and to reflect on them.

Ordinal variable

A variable whose categories can be rank ordered (as in the case of interval and ratio variables), but the distances between the categories are not equal across the range.

Outlier

An extreme value in a distribution of values. If a variable has an extreme value—either very high or very low—the arithmetic mean or the range will be distorted by it.

Paradigm

A term deriving from the history of science, where it was used to describe a cluster of beliefs and dictates that for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, and how results should be interpreted.

Participant observation

Research in which the researcher immerses him- or herself in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions. Participant observation usually includes interviewing key informants and studying documents and as such is difficult to distinguish from ethnography. In this book, participant observation is employed to refer to the specifically observational aspect of ethnography.

Pearson's r

A measure of the strength and direction of the relationship between two interval/ratio variables.

Personal documents

Documents such as diaries, letters, and autobiographies that are not written for an official purpose. They provide first-person accounts of the writer's life and events within it.

Phenomenology

A philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how in particular the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions concerning his or her grasp of that world.

Phi

A method for assessing the strength of the relationship between two dichotomous variables.

Photo-elicitation

Typically, photo-elicitation is a visual research methods that entails getting interviewees to discuss one or more photographs in the course of an interview. The photograph(s) may be extant or may have been taken by the interviewee for the purpose of the research.

Population

The universe of units from which a sample is to be selected.

Positive relationship

A relationship between two variables, whereby as one increases the other increases as well.

Positivism

An epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond.

Postal questionnaire

A form of self-completion questionnaire that is sent to respondents and usually returned by them by mail.

Postmodernism

A position that displays a distaste for master-narratives and for a realist orientation. In the context of research methodology, postmodernists display a preference for qualitative methods and a concern with the modes of representation of research findings.

Pre-coded question

Another name for a closed question. The term is often preferred, because such a question removes the need for the application of a coding frame to the question after it has been answered. This is because the range of answers has been predetermined and a numerical code will have been pre-assigned to each possible answer. The term is particularly appropriate when the codes appear on the questionnaire or interview schedule.

Probability sampling, sample

A sample that has been selected using random sampling and in which each unit in the population has a known probability of being selected.

Purposive sampling, sample

A form of non-probability sample in which the researcher aims to sample cases/ participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed.

Qualitative content analysis

An approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts. There is an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features. Compare with quantitative research.

Quantitative research

Quantitative research usually emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is deductivist and objectivist and incorporates a natural science model of the research process (in particular, one influenced by positivism), but quantitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features. Compare with qualitative research.

Quasi-experiment

A research design that is close to being an experiment but that does not meet the requirements fully and therefore does not exhibit complete internal validity.

Questionnaire

A collection of questions administered to respondents. When used on its own, the term usually denotes a self-completion questionnaire.

Quota sample

A sample that non-randomly samples a population in terms of the relative proportions of people in different categories. It is a type of non-probability sample.

Random assignment

A term used in connection with experiments to refer to the random allocation of research participants to the experimental group and the control group.

Random sampling

Sampling whereby the inclusion of a unit of a population occurs entirely by chance.

Randomized controlled trial

A term used to describe a study that meets the criteria of a true experiment. The term is used in fields like the health sciences in which the goal is to test the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a clinical intervention.

Range

The difference between the maximum and the minimum value in a distribution of values associated with an interval or ratio variable.

Ratio variable

An interval variable with a true zero point.

Reactivity, reactive effect

A term used to describe the response of research participants to the fact that they know they are being studied. Reactivity is deemed to result in untypical behaviour.

Realism

An epistemological position that acknowledges a reality independent of the senses that is accessible to the researcher's tools and theoretical speculations. It implies that the categories created by scientists refer to real objects in the natural or social worlds. See also critical realism.

Reflexivity

A term used in research methodology to refer to a reflectiveness among social researchers about the implications for the knowledge of the social world they generate of their methods, values, biases, decisions, and mere presence in the very situations they investigate.

Relationship

An association between two variables whereby the variation in one variable coincides with variation in another variable. See also Negative relationship and Positive relationship.

Reliability

The degree to which a measure of a concept is stable.

Replication, replicability

The degree to which the results of a study can be reproduced. See also internal reliability.

Representative sample

A sample that reflects the population accurately, so that it is a microcosm of the population.

Research design

This term is employed in this book to refer to a framework for the collection and analysis of data. A choice of research design reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions of the research process (such as causality and generalization).

Research question

A research question is a question that provides an explicit statement of what it is the researcher wants to know about.

Research strategy

A term used in this book to refer to a general orientation to the conduct of social research (see quantitative research and qualitative research).

Respondent validation

Sometimes called member validation, this is a process whereby a researcher provides the people on whom he or she has conducted research with an account of his or her findings and requests feedback on that account.

Response set

The tendency among some respondents to multiple-indicator measures to reply in the same way to each constituent item.

Retroduction, retroductive

A form of reasoning that entails making an inference about the causal mechanism that lies behind and is responsible for regularities that are observed in the social world. It is very much associated with critical realism.

Rhetoric, rhetorical

A concern with the ways in which appeals to convince or persuade are devised.

Sample

The segment of the population that is selected for research. It is a subset of the population. The method of selection may be based on probability sampling or nonprobability sampling principles.

Sampling error

Differences between a random sample and the population from which it is selected.

Sampling frame

The listing of all units in the population from which a sample is selected.

Scale

A term that is usually used interchangeably with index to refer to a multiple-indicator measure in which the score a person gives for each component indicator is used to provide a composite score for that person.

Scan sampling

A sampling approach in structured observation whereby an entire group of individuals is scanned at regular intervals and the behaviour of all of them is recorded at each occasion.

Secondary analysis

The analysis of data by researchers who will probably not have been involved in the collection of those data for purposes that may not have been envisaged by those responsible for the data collection. Secondary analysis may entail the analysis of either quantitative data or qualitative data.

Self-completion questionnaire

A questionnaire that the respondent answers without the aid of an interviewer. Sometimes called a self-administered questionnaire.

Semiotics

The study/science of signs. An approach to the analysis of documents and other phenomena that emphasizes the importance of seeking out the deeper meaning of those phenomena. A semiotic approach is concerned to uncover the processes of meaning production and how signs are designed to have an effect upon actual and prospective consumers of those signs.

Semi-structured interview

A term that covers a wide range of types. It typically refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions. The questions are frequently somewhat more general in their frame of reference from that typically found in a structured interview schedule. Also, the interviewer usually has some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies.

Sensitizing concept

A term devised by Blumer to refer to a preference for treating a concept as a guide in an investigation, so that it points in a general way to what is relevant or important. This position contrasts with the idea of an operational definition, in which the meaning of a concept is fixed in advance of carrying out an investigation. Sign A term employed in semiotics. A sign is made up of a signifier (the manifestation of a sign) and the signified (that idea or deeper meaning to which the signifier refers).

Simple observation

The passive and unobtrusive observation of behaviour.

Simple random sample

A sample in which each unit has been selected entirely by chance. Each unit of the population has a known and equal probability of inclusion in the sample.

Snowball sample

A non-probability sample in which the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others.

Social desirability bias

A distortion of data that is caused by respondents' attempts to construct an account that conforms to a socially acceptable model of belief or behaviour.

Spearman's rho

A measure of the strength and direction of the relationship between two ordinal variables.

SPSS

Originally short for Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS is a widely used computer program that allows quantitative data to be managed and analysed.

Spurious relationship

A relationship between two variables is said to be spurious if it is being produced by the impact of a third variable (often referred to as a confounding variable) on each of the two variables that form the spurious relationship. When the third variable is controlled, the relationship disappears.

Standard deviation

A measure of dispersion around the mean.

Standard error of the mean

An estimate of the amount that a sample mean is likely to differ from the population mean.

Statistical significance (test of)

Allows the analyst to estimate how confident he or she can be that the results deriving from a study based on a randomly selected sample are generalizable to the population from which the sample was drawn. Such a test does not allow the researcher to infer that the findings are of substantive importance. The chi-square test is an example of this kind of test. The process of using a test of statistical significance to generalize from a sample to a population is known as statistical inference.

Stratified random sample

A sample in which units are randomly sampled from a population that has been divided into categories (strata).

Structured interview

A research interview usually in the context of survey research in which all respondents are asked exactly the same questions in the same order with the aid of a formal interview schedule.

Structured observation

Often also called systematic observation, structured observation is a technique in which the researcher employs explicitly formulated rules for the observation and recording of behaviour. The rules inform observers about what they should look for and how they should record behaviour.

Survey research

A cross-sectional design in relation to which data are collected predominantly by self-completion questionnaire or by structured interview on more than one case (usually quite a lot more than one) and at a single point in time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables (usually many more than two), which are then examined to detect patterns of relationship between variables.

Symbolic interactionism

A theoretical perspective in sociology and social psychology that views social interaction as taking place in terms of the meanings actors attach to action and things.

Synchronous online interview or focus group

Online interviews may be asynchronous or synchronous. In the case of the latter, the transactions between participants are in real time, so that there will be only brief time lapses between interviewers' questions and participants' replies, and, in the case of focus groups, between participants' contributions to the discussion.

Systematic review

Systematic reviews are reviews of the literature that aim to provide an account of the literature in a domain that is comprehensive, capable of replication, and transparent in its approach. Systematic reviews pay close attention to assessing the quality of research in deciding whether a study should be included or not. Metaanalysis and meta-ethnography are both forms of systematic review.

Systematic sample

A probability sampling method in which units are selected from a sampling frame according to fixed intervals, such as every fifth unit.

Text

A term that is used either in the conventional sense of a written work or in more recent years to refer to a wide range of phenomena. For example, in arriving at a thick description, Geertz refers to treating culture as a text.

Thematic analysis

A term used in connection with the analysis of qualitative data to refer to the extraction of key themes in one's data. It is a rather diffuse approach with few generally agreed principles for defining core themes in data.

Theoretical sampling, sample

A term used mainly in relation to grounded theory to refer to purposive sampling carried out so that emerging theoretical considerations guide the selection of cases and/or research participants. Theoretical sampling is supposed to continue until a point of theoretical saturation is reached.

Theoretical saturation

In grounded theory, the point when emerging concepts have been fully explored and no new theoretical insights are being generated. See also theoretical sampling.

Thick description

A term devised by Geertz to refer to detailed accounts of a social setting that can form the basis for the creation of general statements about a culture and its significance in people's social lives.

Time sampling

A sampling method in structured observation, which entails using a criterion for deciding when observation will occur.

Transcription, transcript

The written translation of a recorded interview or focus group session.

Triangulation

The use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked.

Trustworthiness

A set of criteria advocated by some writers for assessing the quality of qualitative research.

Turn-taking

The notion from conversation analysis that order in everyday conversation is achieved through orderly taking of turns in conversations.

Univariate analysis

The analysis of a single variable at a time.

Unobtrusive methods

Methods that do not entail an awareness among research participants that they are being studied and that are therefore not subject to reactivity.

Unstructured interview

An interview in which the interviewer typically has only a list of topics or issues, often called an interview guide, that are typically covered. The style of questioning is usually very informal. The phrasing and sequencing of questions will vary from interview to interview.

Validity

A concern with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research. There are different aspects of validity. See, in particular, measurement validity, internal validity, external validity, and ecological validity. When used on its own, validity is usually taken to refer to measurement validity.

Variable

An attribute in terms of which cases vary. See also dependent variable and independent variable. Compare with constant.

Web survey

A social survey conducted so that respondents complete a questionnaire via a website.