The Practice and Problems of Social Research

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Office Hours: M 11:30-12:30, W 10:30-12:30
SSB 447
Some Housekeeping

• Buy the Schutt book and a clicker if you haven’t already.

• Homework 1 is posted online and due a week from today.

• We’ll start with working out the clickers today.
Testing the Clickers

• I am a:
  A. Freshman
  B. Sophomore
  C. Junior
  D. Senior or Super-Senior
Testing the Clickers

• My major is (probably):
  A. International Relations
  B. Other Social Science (i.e. poli sci, business, econ, sociology, anthropology...)
  C. Arts/Humanities
  D. Natural Sciences
  E. Other
Testing the Clickers

• I have had the following research methods training (choose the most advanced that applies):
  A. Hypothe-what?
  B. A little bit in high school (not AP)
  C. AP stats in high school
  D. 1 university research methods class (stats or other)
  E. More than 1 university research methods class
An Outline for Today

- Characteristics of good research
- Types of research
Good Science is Objective

• Mary’s parents were divorced. It ruined her adolescence. Her brother committed suicide.

• Eliza’s parents were also divorced. After the divorce both her parents were happier, and her relationships with both of them improved.

• Later each become social scientists and conduct studies on the effects of divorce on children.
Good Science is Objective

• Political partisanship can effect the way we process factual information.

• In a 1988 survey, a majority of “strong Democrats” said that inflation had gotten worse during the Reagan administration.
  • Inflation was 13.5% in 1980 and 4.1% in 1988.

• In 1996, a majority of Republicans believed that the budget deficit increased during Bill Clinton’s first term.
  • The deficit had declined from $255 Billion to $22 Billion.

• It is easier for people to learn facts that are consistent with their existing beliefs and ideologies.
Good Science is Objective

- Researchers are human.
  - We usually care about our results.

- Every researcher is employed by somebody.
  - We face professional incentives to get the “right” answer.

- Good research design and rigorous implementation are the way we cut through the crap and the subjectivity and find the truth.
Good Science is Cumulative

- Builds on previous research
- Methodologically sound: Uses accepted methodologies or justifies the use of new methods.
- Transparent
  - Literature review, theory, methods, data, results, conclusions
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Good Science is Replicable

• Replication serves two purposes:
  • Enforcing honesty and competence
  • Facilitates cumulative research
    • Allows scholars to easily bring new methods, theory, or data to existing research
Good Science is Relevant

• Basic science and applied science are both relevant
  • How do social networks influence behavior?
  • Does knowing that your friend voted make you more likely to vote?

• Academia fails when we ask unimportant questions.
Descriptive Research

• How do we know that?

• Descriptive research gives us rigorous, careful, objective descriptions of the world.
  
  • Useful for identifying research questions (and building theory).
    
    • We may not know why things are happening, but at least we can find out what is going on.
  
  • Useful for making decisions in business, politics, philanthropy...
Exploratory Research

- Great tool for building theory
- Establishes that certain behaviors, phenomena exist. Maybe we don’t know exactly how widespread something is, but we know it’s happening.
- For example: James Fenno’s *Home Styles*.
Exploratory Research

- Poverty Today
  - No Access to Doctors
  - Poor Nutrition
  - Children Work

- Poverty Tomorrow
  - Children Work
  - Poor Nutritional
  - Poor School Attendance

- Bad Health
Descriptive and Exploratory Research Build Theory
Explanatory Research

Theory → Action

Research
Identifying causal pathways

- Poor School Attendance
  - Children Work
    - Poverty Today
  - Low Skills
    - Poverty Tomorrow

Omitted Factor

- Racial discrimination
- Cultural Values
- ???
Explanatory Research

- Not just what is happening, but why.
- Causation
- We know poor kids often work outside the home, but...
  - Does poverty cause children to work outside the home, or is it something else?
- We know kids that work outside the home often don’t go to school, but...
  - Is it the outside jobs that keep them out of school, or is it something else?
Explanatory Research

- Understanding causal relationships helps us predict what will happen if we change something.

- If lack of school attendance causes low skill attainment, and low skill attainment causes poverty...
  - Then increasing school attendance should improve skill attainment and reduce poverty.
• Did it work?

• This is all the rage in the international aid community these days. Are programs working? If so, which programs give the largest effects for the most money?
Jobs in Evaluation Research

• **Job Title:** Monitoring and Evaluation Fellow

• **Description:** Village Enterprise is seeking a Fellow to lead its field-level Monitoring and Evaluation activities, design and manage innovative pilot projects as well as current Special Projects in a highly dynamic team. The M&E Fellow will also support East African staff to implement and improve the organization's core program, supervise interns and regional managers, and monitor program implementation.

• Village Enterprise is an innovative microenterprise development organization working in East Africa to reduce poverty with the following mission – “To equip people living in extreme poverty with resources to create sustainable businesses.” Village Enterprise provides business training, seed capital/start-up funds .... Over the next five years, Village Enterprise plans to expand its program, evaluation and innovation efforts significantly.
The Democratic Peace

- Research question: Why is it that democracies tend not to fight one another?
- What types of research preceded our ability to even ask this question?
- What type of research does this question represent?
- Give me a theory that answers this question.
- How might we test that theory?
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Why do poor countries stay poor?

- Weak Rule of Law
  - Low Government Capacity
  - Low Investment
  - Poverty Today
  - Poverty Tomorrow
  - Omitted Factor
Any questions about your homework?