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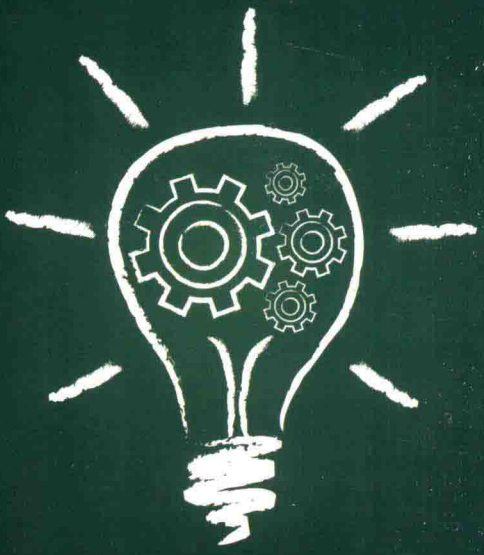

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How Do We Know What We Know?

Research Foundations

How Do We Know What We Know?

Douglas Woodwell
University of Indianapolis

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Detailed Contents

Preface xii

About the Author xvi

PART I: OVERVIEW 1

Chapter 1: Visualizing Research 2
Introduction 2
Visualizing Research 4
The Research Question 6
The Process of Research 7
Conclusion 15
Discussion Questions 16

PART II: GETTING TO CAUSAL THEORY 17

Chapter 2: Finding and Organizing Information 18
Introduction 18
Observation 19
First-Person Observation: Seeing It Yourself 20
Qualitative Approaches to First-Person Observation 20
Quantitative Observational Studies and Instruments 24
"Media"-ted Data Collection:
Obtaining Data From the Middleman 26
Qualitative Mediated
Observation: Episodic Records 26
Quantitative Mediated Observation:
Running Records and Content Analysis 26
Opinion Seeking: Interviews and Polling/Surveys 28
Qualitative Opinion Seeking: Interviews 28
Quantitative Opinion Seeking: Surveys/Polling 30

Samples and Strategies in Polling Research 30
Survey Instrument Design 34
Description 35
Classification and Conceptualization 39
"Grounding" Theory 42
Conclusion 43
Discussion Questions 44
Appendix to Chapter 2: Literature Reviews 45

Chapter 3: Causal Theory **49**
Introduction 50
What Is Causal Theory? 50
Deriving Theories Inductively and Deductively 52
Inductive Reasoning 53
Deductive Reasoning 55
Qualitative and Quantitative Theory and Research 56
Qualitative Theory and Research 58
Quantitative Theory and Research 59
Mixed Methods 61
Theoretical Levels of Analysis 62
Main Traditions in Theory Building in the Social Sciences 63
The Interpretivist Tradition: Microlevel Induction 63
Rational Choice Theory: Micro- and Macrolevel Deductions 67
Structuralism: Macrolevel Deduction 69
Behavioralism, Positivism, and Realism: Inductive Midlevel Analysis 71
Building a Theoretical Argument 72
Deductive Argumentation: Syllogisms, Conditional Logic, and Mathematics 72
Inductive Argumentation: Four Steps for Building a Convincing Argument 73
Conclusion 80
Discussion Questions 80
Appendix to Chapter 3: Prisoner's Dilemma: A Simple Example of Formal, Rational Choice Theory 81

PART III: VERIFYING THEORY 85

Chapter 4: Preparing to Test Hypotheses 86
Introduction 86
A Typology of Variables 87
Theoretical Models 89
Hypotheses 91
Operationalization and Measurement 93
Validity, Reliability, and Precision: In Research Projects and in Measurement 94
Validity and Reliability in Research Projects 95
Validity of Measurements 98
Reliability of Measurements 103
Precision of Measurements 104
Experimental Data Collection 107
Quasi- and Natural Experiments 112
Conclusion 113
Discussion Questions 113

Chapter 5: Testing Hypotheses 115
Introduction 115
Hypothesis Testing and the Limits of Qualitative Research 116
Hypothesis Testing Through Critical Tests 120
Hypothesis Testing Through Statistical Analysis 121
Statistical Significance 122
Effect Size and Direction 123
Types of Statistical Tests 124
Regression Analysis 125
Ordinary Least Squares 126
Heteroscedasticity and Other Big Words 133
Regression With "Limited Dependent Variables" 137
Logit 139
Probit 140
Ordered Logit and Probit 141
Poisson and Negative Binomial Regression 141
Survival Models 142
Cross-Tabulation Analysis 142
Difference-of-Means Tests and ANOVA 145
What Does It Look Like? 147
Data Dredging and Hypothesis Testing 149

Conclusion 150
Discussion Questions 151

PART IV: USING THEORY **153**

Chapter 6: Applying Theory and Evaluating the "Real World" **154**
Introduction 154
The Varied Nature of "Case Study" Research 156
Case Study Purpose Number 1: Understanding Theory Better 158
Case Study Purpose Number 2: Understanding a Case Better 159
Structured-Focused Analysis/Interpretative Case Study Research 160
Simulations 163
Theory Into Action: Praxis and Best Practices 165
Research as a Cyclical Process 167
Conclusion 168
Discussion Questions 168

Afterword **170**

Glossary **173**

References **192**

Index **197**

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1.	A model of the research process	5
Table 2.1.	Observational Data Gathering: Qualitative and Quantitative	20
Figure 2.1.	Breakdown of qualitative observational data collection	22
Figure 2.2.	Descriptive versus causal research questions	36
Table 2.2.	Examples of professions by research "dimension"	37
Figure 2.3.	Example of a "conceptual map"	41
Figure 3.1.	Deductive and inductive reasoning	52
Figure 3.2.	Deductive and inductive reasoning in the research model (Figure 1.1)	54
Figure 3.3.	The qualitative–quantitative spectrum	57
Table 3.1.	Comparative Methodology Designs	77
Table 4.1.	Examples of Independent and Dependent Variables	90
Figure 4.1.	Breakdown of individual variable types	89
Figure 4.2.	Sample graphical model	91
Figure 4.3.	Hypotheses: Bridging theory and evidence	92
Figure 4.4.	Breakdown of "validity"	96
Figure 4.5.	Breakdown of "construct validity"	100
Figure 4.6.	Depiction of validity and reliability	105
Figure 4.7.	The three steps of classic experimentation	109
Table 5.1.	Example of a (Very Small) Data Set	121
Table 5.2.	Analyses Commonly Used With Different Combinations of Variables	125
Figure 5.1.	Simple linear relationship with a coefficient = 2	127
Figure 5.2.	Real-world data are not perfectly linear	129
Figure 5.3.	A sample regression line	129
Figure 5.4.	Is there a statistically significant relationship here?	130
Figure 5.5.	Control and ceteris paribus	133

Figure 5.6.	Heteroscedasticity	134
Figure 5.7.	Collinearity displayed using a Venn diagram	136
Figure 5.8.	How a dichotomous dependent variable would look (with a continuous independent "x" variable)	138
Table 5.3.	Sample Baseline Analysis: Change in Conflict Likelihood	140
Table 5.4.	Simple Contingency Table/Cross-Tabulation	144
Table 5.5.	Contingency Table/Cross-Tabulation Controlling for Income	145
Table 5.6.	Elements Making Up (Most) Regression Output Tables	148
Table 5.7.	Sample Regression Output[a]	149
Figure 6.1.	Breakdown of the purposes of case study research	157

Preface

I don't know what they want me to do!

It can be a frustrating and disorienting feeling to be asked to design and/or execute a research project from scratch. Whether a scholar or student, we have all been there. I'll never forget as a graduate student being told by my advisor that my research needed a "model." After working on my model for the weekend, I brought it back to him, confident that I had put together some really good research only to be told, "It's pretty good, but you still need a model." Ugh.

Of course, that was just one of many frustrations. Other professors told me I needed to develop case studies or conduct ethnographic research. I didn't know what they really meant. As for the statistical approaches that represented the central thrust of my research, well, don't worry "you'll figure it out."

I delved into the libraries at my university, checking out every social science methodology book I could find. Most books involved in-depth discussions of approaches that seemed unrelated to anything I was researching. Other books were intimidating biblical-sized tomes that covered everything and anything but were as overwhelming as they were unapproachable. I eventually got through my dissertation project, but it seemed like the process was a lot more difficult than it needed to be. I never did find a methodology book that worked for me.

This is the book that I wish that I had read back then. In this book, I present a way of mentally framing research in a way that is understandable and approachable while also discussing some of the more specific issues that will aid students in understanding the options available when pursuing research. It is my hope that you as the reader, whether you are an undergraduate or graduate student, a professional or a scholar, or someone simply interested in how research leads to new discoveries, will find that this book helps crystallize your thinking about how we know

what we know and how we go about finding out about those things we do not know.

While at certain points I discuss in detail some commonly used research methods, my primary goal in this work is to convey an intuitive and easy-to-understand framework for understanding how research methodologies as a whole fit together and make intuitive sense. Many scholars do not even understand the basic, common sense, nature of how research methodologies guide the search for answers about the world. For some, methodological issues are often thought of as an abstraction or worse, dismissed as a distraction. Furthermore, among many in the social sciences and humanities, in particular, methodological study is simply conflated with quantitative methods that represent a big "turnoff" for the nonmathematically inclined.

Some scholars have put in great efforts defending their own research traditions while pooh-poohing the approaches of others. Much of the "Methodensteite," or "methods conflict" that has reared its head over the years, particularly in the social sciences, has been based on an inadequate understanding of what different research approaches bring to the table and how different types of research questions require different methods of inquiry.

Yet much fruitful research has been conducted by bringing together different methodological traditions and examining research questions in new and interesting ways. For such cross-disciplinary and cross-methodological efforts to be successful, however, scholars need to understand research in a more holistic and more intuitive fashion. The goal of scholars and students should be to achieve a better intuitive and logical understanding of methodological design writ large rather than simply practicing something of an imitative approach to methods particular to their fields. Students and scholars confused by the morass of disjointed terminology and abstract concepts associated with research methodology are likely to benefit from the broader approach to research I take in this book.

My own training is in the social sciences, which in some ways represent a methodological middle ground between the contextual-minded humanities and the universal pursuits of those in the natural sciences. A well-trained social scientist might sometimes be viewed as a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none, but the exposure to a wide spectrum of research questions and methodologies means that social scientist researchers are well positioned to understand the broad variety of research traditions that exist across fields.

Although many of the examples that I use in this book and some of the methods that I focus on are social science oriented, general methodological approaches are not the exclusive domain of certain types of research. The "big picture" of research I discuss is relevant across the humanities and social and natural sciences. Ultimately, pursuing answers to research questions in the most sensible way is not something that is specific to particular fields of study but rather an exercise in thoughtful problem solving that best addresses the subject at hand, regardless of a researcher's specialization.

Research is a collaborative effort, and this book is no exception. There are many people who gave their helpful suggestions, time, and support. I would like to thank Sage, the good people who work there, and the outside reviewers who worked with them to provide a wealth of suggestions. These reviewers, whose research specialties covered a wide variety of fields, included James R. Anthos of South University, Paul Boyd of Johnson & Wales University, R. David Frantzreb II of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Monica B. Glina of Montclair State University, Karen Larwin of Youngstown State University, John Mitrano of Central Connecticut State University, David Vanata of Ashland University, and Maria Victoria Guglietti of Mount Royal University. Any remaining mistakes and shortcomings are, of course, my own.

Two of my colleagues also took on the exhaustive task of reviewing earlier versions of my manuscript. I offer my sincere appreciation to Joe Hansel, of the University of Indianapolis's School of Psychological Sciences, and Milind Thakar, of the Department of History and Political Science, for their efforts.

Despite the best efforts of the above individuals, any errors or misconceptions contained within this book, and there are certain to be a few, should be considered entirely the fault of the author.

I would also like to especially thank Sharon Goetz, who has now taken the time to help cross the t's and dot the i's for two of my book manuscripts. Her time, support, and friendship have been invaluable in recent years.

Many of my students have also offered helpful insights on what works and what does not work in this text. Several of them, including Wesley Cate and Ben Waddell, expended extra effort in helping improve the writing in this book.

I might also never have begun this project had it not been for a conversation with Chinyelu Lee on a balcony in downtown Washington, D.C., five years ago. Thanks Chu, for both the inspiration and the friendship.

Last, but far from least, I would like to thank Sara Bremer Sale, Kim Deckman, Guin Holman, Katy Mann, Lindsay Shoger, and the rest of the crew at the Rehabilitation Hospital of Indiana. Partway through the process of authoring this book, I was permanently paralyzed by a rare abnormality of the blood vessels in my spinal cord. I was fortunate to have such a competent and supportive group help me piece things back together.

Please consider donating to www.christopherreeve.org or similar organizations dedicated to research into repairing spinal cord injuries and making a better life for those living with one.

About the Author

Douglas Woodwell is an associate professor of international relations in the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Indianapolis. He received his BA in international studies at American University, his MA in German and European Studies at Georgetown University, and his PhD in political science at Yale University. His earlier works include articles written for international relations journals and the World Bank as well as the book *Nationalism in International Relations*.

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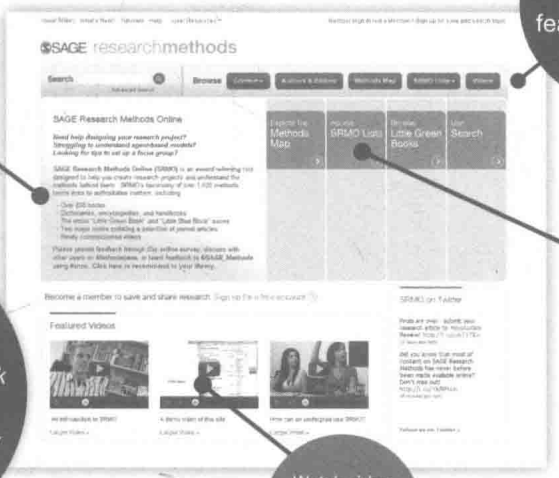

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