Writing a Research Report: The Basics

• Where do research reports come from?
  – The incremental development from initial results to polished product. The importance of peer contribution.

• Who reads social science research?
  – The importance of writing to your audience. Especially when writing for general audiences.

• What is the importance of any one report or paper?
  – The continual process of building knowledge. Few "revolutionary" breakthroughs as in natural science.
  – Importance of recognizing intellectual debt.

Writing a Research Report: Organization

1. Purpose and overview – motivate your research
2. Review of literature – situate your research
3. Study design – hypotheses, data collection, method of analysis
4. Analysis and interpretation – the “core” of the report
5. Recognize limitations
6. Summary and Conclusions – what do we now know? What don’t we know?

1. Define your Objective

A. What are you going to study?
  • Limit yourself to a very specific question or set of questions.
B. Why is this question important?
  i.e, Who cares?
C. Is your objective descriptive or explanatory?
  • This is actually very difficult – especially for new researchers.
Purpose and overview: An Example

- To examine the relationship between increasing economic independence for women and age at first marriage.
- Describe large changes in age at marriage
- Discuss implications for family formation
- Emphasize importance as a reflection of women’s changing roles in society.

2. Background

- What does theory/conventional wisdom suggest?
  - Recognize possibility of different theoretical expectations
- What do previous analyses suggest?
  - i.e., which explanation(s) are supported by existing evidence?
- What are limitations of previous analyses?
  - Sample (e.g., only whites)
  - Data (e.g., only cross-sectional)

Review of Literature: An Example

- Discuss alternative theoretical explanations
  - Functionalist (economic)
  - Conflict theory (feminist)
  - Other (career establishment?)
- What do previous analyses suggest? (i.e., which explanation(s) are supported by existing evidence?)
- What are limitations of previous analyses?
3. Study Design

- Conceptualization
  - Specify the meaning of concepts or variables to be studied (example: marital status and health)
- Describe research method
  - GSS data, your own survey, other data
  - What is your sample? Why is this appropriate?
  - Why is this method more appropriate than others?
- Operationalization
  - How are the variables actually measured?
- State hypotheses (if any)
- Describe methods of analysis
  (discuss causality, spurious correlations, etc.)

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Study Design (1):
An Example

- Describe data
  - (e.g., nationally representative survey of 5,000 women aged 18-34 in 1990, interviewed again every year).
- Describe variables
  (e.g., marriage and wage income, by age).
- State hypotheses
- Describe methods

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Study Design (2):
An Example

- Hypotheses:
  1. Higher earnings is associated with a lower likelihood of ever marrying (from functionalist and conflict theories).
  2. Higher earnings is associated with later, but not less, marriage (career-entry theory)
- Methods
  - Examine relationship between earnings and marriage at all ages.
4: Analysis and Interpretation

- Present findings
  - Charts, tables, figures
  - Describe
- Interpretation
  - What do findings say about your hypotheses? Supportive or not?
  - If not, what is possible alternative explanation?

Analysis and Interpretation: An Example

- Main Finding:
  - Higher earnings is associated with a lower likelihood of marrying only at young ages. Earnings is actually positively related to marriage at older ages (e.g., 28+)
- Interpretation
  - Economically independent women marry later than other women, but no difference in likelihood of ever marrying (i.e., they “catch up”).
  - Not consistent with predictions of functionalist or feminist theories.
  - More consistent with career-entry explanation.

5: Recognize Limitations & Potential Problems

- Potential measurement problems
  a) Sample - generalizability
  b) Number of observations – confidence
  c) Conceptualization and operationalization - validity
  d) Social desirability
  e) Omitted variables bias
  f) Sample selection bias (not such a problem with GSS data)
Summary and Conclusion

- Restate what was done
- Restate what was found
- Restate interpretation
- Clarify theoretical significance
  - e.g., marriage not disappearing but nature of marital bargain appears to be changing
- State limitations
  - e.g., only one measure of economic status, no consideration of other factors, etc.
- Suggest direction for future research
  - how can limitations of your study be addressed?
  - what interesting questions does your study raise?