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Preface

To the Student

Welcome to Understanding Research, 2nd Edition. Learning how to do social research can be fun, but many students believe they know little about the topic and are intimidated by it. You have already encountered the results of social research studies. They are in course materials, newspapers, Internet sources, and news programs. Most professional work settings, businesses, and agencies regularly use research results. While you may have encountered the results of research, this course looks behind the scene to examine the processes of doing research that produced the results.

Here are four basic ideas about social research to keep in mind as you read this text:

- Social research is a process that produces a product, namely research results.
- The research process and its results have relevance for individuals, organizations, communities, and nations.
- The research process grew out of the combined wisdom and experience of thousands of people across many decades.
- You can master the fundamentals of doing research.

Social research is a process or an ongoing activity that takes place over time. People do research; it does not just happen. They engage in a series of actions to produce the product, i.e., research results. As a process or activity, real people make decisions, take risks, engage in various steps, write things down, and think seriously. The principles, techniques, and stages of this process are outcomes of thousands of researchers who worked over many decades to iron out difficulties and seek the best ways to learn about the social world. The purpose of a course on research is to help you learn about doing research and understand the process by which we acquire knowledge about the social life around us.

At times, the research process and some of its results seem obscure or esoteric, but most of the time studies have real consequences. They are relevant to daily life and to being a citizen, a friend, a parent, a professional, an employee, or a business owner. It is not always immediately apparent, but most research studies can have practical consequences for how we make decisions. Some people, out of ignorance, say it is “just research” or “only a study.” This occurs when they cannot see the connections of research to their lives and to the lives of people, organizations, and events around them.

Many newcomers feel intimidated by the social research enterprise. Yes, college professors, high-powered research scientists and others with years of advanced schooling and training conduct most research studies. This does not mean that research is beyond a beginning student. To conduct research study only requires an ability to think, to collect evidence, and to examine connections or implications. A beginning student may not grasp very complex, advanced results or be able to conduct a highly sophisticated research study, but grasping the basic principles, key procedures, and overall process is possible with an investment of modest amounts of time and effort. Once you grasp the fundamentals of the research process, it is a short distance to move to doing small-scale studies of your own. Understanding and doing research can open an entire world of studies, findings, and new insights.

To the Instructor

Few students approach a course on research methods with excitement and positive expectations. It is often a required course in the curriculum and tends to generate unnecessary angst and anxiety among many students. Yet, learning how to do research does not have to be unpleasant, difficult, or stressful. Conducting a study can be fun and exciting. After all, by doing social research students explore and learn new things, probe into diverse areas of social life, and feel empowered by creating new knowledge. Conducting a study does require self-awareness, rigor, and discipline—but students acknowledge the need for self-awareness, rigor, and discipline for the interests about which they are motivated, such as athletic competition, a hobby such as video gaming, spectator sports, fashion or music, or a volunteer activity.

My approach to teaching about social research comes from personal experience. I feel genuine joy when I see students learn—and specifically, watch them learn about processes of discovery and knowledge creation. Over the past three decades, I taught social research methods to undergraduates and graduate students, reflecting, adjusting, learning, and improving over that period.

My goal has been to identify what students need to know and present it in a manner that they can easily grasp. This meant reaching to the fundamentals of social science research ideas and techniques, creating a transparent structure to organize material, and providing students with both everyday relevant examples and academic studies that build basic knowledge. My goal has been to make the essentials of doing high-quality research accessible to students in ways that they can become excited about the
Preface

research process. In short, I seek to distill the core principles, process, and procedures of research and present them in a manner that students will want to learn them.

Many professions, applied fields, and academic disciplines use the findings and techniques of social science research. My own background has been as an eclectic and wide-ranging sociologist. I am committed to a broad, ecumenical approach to social scientific inquiry. The scientific research community has produced diverse approaches and techniques for conducting social scientific research. I believe it is a serious error to fixate on a single research approach or technique—be it the experiment or survey, quantitative methods in general, or qualitative ethnographic research. It is a serious error because it limits our understanding of a complex, changing social world, and because it misinforms students about the scope and promise of research. By being inclusive with regard to diverse forms that social science research can take, we gain much and lose little.

To me, it is unwise to disengage the concrete and technical aspects of conducting research from the broader epistemological issues and the ethical-political dimensions of the social science enterprise. I view social research as an accomplishment by human actors that takes place in specific social-historical contexts. Removing human agency and context from how we think about the research process only introduces distortion and diminishes understanding.

I believe applying the principles, process, and results of social research is consequential for the choices and decisions we make in our daily lives and in organizational settings. When we apply an open-ended understanding of the logic and results of social research, better choices and decisions in our organizations, communities, and lives frequently follow. Students can improve their lives and the life conditions of the people around them when they understand the research process. A corollary of this point is that the failure to understand research will likely condemn the next generation to fall behind and make many unwise decisions. Few students who learn about social research become full-time professional research scientists, but most will become parents, friends, colleagues, employees, citizen-voters, and community members. I believe having a sound understanding of the processes and principles of social research is likely to improve how they will fulfill those life-long roles.

New to the Edition

The second edition of Understanding Research seeks to expand upon the core principles of this course: to make the essentials of doing high quality research accessible to students in ways that they can become excited about the research process. As you have come to expect with this course, core principles, processes, and procedures of research are distilled and presented in a manner that students will want to learn them. It is a stress-free and enjoyable approach to the research methods course by providing salient real world examples throughout.

- Each chapter opens with a vignette/case that has real world relevance and connections to the content material of the chapter.
- Data and examples throughout the course represent what is happening right now in research methods with most examples drawn from studies published recently in academic journals.
- The course offers new tools and methods for applying classic concepts like expanded strategies for approaching a literature review and ways to think critically and creatively about nonreactive research techniques.
- In addition to offering guidance on the fundamentals of writing a research report, this edition offers a stronger emphasis on the seriousness of preparing a research report and the importance of communicating findings clearly and efficiently.
- In addition to end of chapter summaries and quizzes, each chapter now has periodic reviews of major points and student self-tests for regular feedback.

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Features

Students need to have both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the learning process addressed to learn and understand material fully. The pedagogical features in this
course guide a student’s travels through each chapter’s content, stimulate their interest, and enhance both their content learning and their engagement with the material. Designed to move beyond the primary cognitive objective of content mastery, the features enhance affective objectives as well. Presenting accurate content in a well-organized manner is insufficient. Students struggle to stay focused when they believe material to be irrelevant to their lives and the world around them, and if they feel overwhelmed by and insecure about the material. This makes stimulating student interest and actively engaging them essential to facilitate their learning. The pedagogical features work together to accomplish these tasks in four ways.

Increasing students’ motivation to learn by demonstrating that the material has “real world” relevance and connections to other issues and knowledge areas.

Students tend to engage with material that they see as being relevant, consequential, and interconnected. Each chapter opens with a research topic, drawn from a variety of fields. Some of these topics are fast food advertising directed at children (Chapter 1), people who are “rednecks” (Chapter 5), and occupations that require “emotional work” (Chapter 10). In addition, each chapter has “boxed features.” Some are case studies of published research on a topic that students may find of interest, or historical events related to the material. As students learn specific methods of doing research, they also see how the methods can reveal new insights about issues in the social world. Two other features, Making It Practical and Tips for the Wise Consumer, emphasize how students can apply the material in a chapter. Examples include Using Article Search Tools (Chapter 2), Improving Unclear Questions (Chapter 6), and Recommendations for Taking Field Notes (Chapter 10).

Stimulating student interest in and engagement with the material by arousing their curiosity.

Student interest and excitement tend to grow when they can see how material offers a pathway to discovering what was previously unknown or contains aspects of a puzzle or mystery that they can solve. The interactive hide/reveal features in the book’s electronic version use curiosity to increase engagement.

Addressing student feelings of anxiety and insecurity about the material by promoting a sense of accomplishment.

Periodical feedback that signals success can circumvent student feelings of uncertainty, disappointment, and defeat when facing material the student finds to be challenging and complex at first. Once a student recognizes that he or she is capable of learning complex material, positive feelings about self and about the material often develop. The student also gains the confidence needed to move onto higher-level material. As a student moves through each chapter, he or she will encounter periodic Summary Review tables of major points, and journaling opportunities for regular instructor feedback. In addition, key terms have links to their definition when first introduced, and again when the term reappears and is used with material in subsequent chapters. This repetition reinforces learning as it builds student confidence.

Sparking critical thinking by including unresolved dilemmas, moral-political dimensions of material, and the reasons why researchers use certain procedures.

Interest often fades when a student encounters a research procedure without a rationale for its use or closed-ended material, i.e., material for which all issues have been resolved and uncertainty removed. Interest can grow when a student confronts areas of disagreement and debate, and is able to see the rationale for using particular procedures. In addition to providing key historical context, the Learning from History feature presents students with an opportunity to analyze and reflect upon past issues and compare them to more recent research and events. Each chapter concludes with a Shared Writing exercise, which allows the student to write open/ended reflections, opinions, and ideas about issues in the material that he or she can share with other students.

Chapter Content

Each chapter of the text has a similar format and mixes the practical-applied aspects of research with the foundational principles and techniques of doing a study. After a brief opening study to stimulate interest, students learn about a specific aspect of the research process anchored with learning objectives for each module.

Chapter 1 outlines the basics of what social research entails. It explains why a student will find it beneficial to understand the research process. There are updates to the explanations on the meaning and importance of critical thinking as well as on the idea of having “standards of evidence” for data in social science research. They see the steps in conducting a research study and learn about some of the purposes for doing a research study. In addition, new examples from the recent research literature are used to illustrate the variety of types of social research.

In Chapter 2 readers learn about the process of moving from a broad topic of interest to specific study design issues, including how to conduct a literature review. The opening issue of tattoos is carried into the chapter. A new feature is the organization of topics in a question-answer format, including the practical design issues for conducting both qualitative and quantitative research. The discussion on variables and hypotheses shows readers how to move from having general ideas about a cause-effect relationship to drawing a diagram a causal explanation.

Chapter 3 considers both traditional issues in research ethics and some of the social-political concerns of doing social research. The current edition adds an entry on the
In Chapter 7 readers learn about the great power of experimental research for demonstrating causality as well as the many specifics of experimental design. The chapter makes clear the similarities and differences between random sampling from a large population and randomization in research participant selection into experimental groups. The chapter highlights the contrast between a highly controlled laboratory setting and the value of a natural and field experiment where control by the experimenter is difficult.

Chapter 8 covers an array of non-reactive research techniques, including content analysis and using existing statistical sources. This edition includes a new emphasis that encourages readers to use their creativity and powers of observation and to consider how they might unobtrusively observe, document, and analyze data on an issue. As an illustration, the chapter has an example study that measured the relative “walkability” of urban areas through the careful observation and the documentation of specific physical features. At the same time, the text asks readers to consider issues of possibility violating privacy in such studies.

Chapter 9 is a very elementary introduction to statistical ideas and techniques used in social research. It begins by explaining how to organize and manage quantitative data, and closes with a review of several common statistical tests and ways to interpret their results. The emphasis of the chapter is to provide readers with a conceptual understanding and to develop their quantitative reasoning skills, more than to have them engage in computation. The chapter illustrates several concepts or techniques using actual data or examples from recent studies on the issues of cohabitation and teen pregnancy.

Chapter 10 introduces readers to ethnographic field research. The sequence of chapter topics follows the chronology of what a person does as he/she conducts a field research study. The chapter opens with a study on the concept of “emotion work.” Readers see this concept continued in other chapter examples. The goal is to show readers not only the specific techniques to use when conducting a field research study, but also the ways by which researchers can develop or elaborate upon a concept, or engage grounded theorizing, during the process of doing field research.

In Chapter 11 readers learn about the value of the historical comparative approach for answering the “big questions” as they used it to study and reveal a great deal about several topical through examples taken from the recent literature on incarnation rates, workplace flexibility, and acts of genocide. Since many student readers find this approach difficult, the chapter makes it accessible and manageable providing them with a step-by-step guide on how one would conduct a historical-comparative study.

Chapter 12 is an overview of how to write research reports and proposals. As in the first edition, readers learn many tips about the writing process, but also that writing is serious, time-consuming work. Readers see the differences
in the writing tasks between a qualitative study report, a quantitative study report, and a research proposal. New to this edition is illustrating how to write a qualitative data study by showing it in an article that was introduced in the chapter on field research. Readers not only learn about the process of conducting the research, but also learn ways to write up findings in a formal report.

Available Instructor Resources

The following resources are available for instructors. These can be downloaded at http://www.pearsonhighered.com/irc. Login required.

- **PowerPoint**—provides a core template of the content covered throughout the text. Can easily be added to customize for your classroom.

- **Instructor’s Manual**—includes chapter summaries and outlines; learning objectives; key terms with definitions; online resources; suggested readings, class exercises and activities; and video resources.

- **Test Bank**—includes additional questions beyond the REVEL in multiple choice and open-ended—short and essay response—formats.

- **MyTest**—an electronic format of the Test Bank to customize in-class tests or quizzes. Visit: http://www.pearsonhighered.com/mytest.

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I dedicate this text to Diane, for all her patience and support.

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