

CHAPTER 2: STUDYING THE WORLD OF WORK

Chapter Outline

- I. Techniques of Analysis
 - A. Ethnographies
 - B. Case Studies
 - C. Multiple Methods
 - C. Sample Surveys
- II. Units of Analysis
 - A. The Worker and the Labor Force
 - B. Industry
 - C. Occupation
 - 1. White Collar/Blue Collar
 - 2. Standard Occupational Classification
 - D. Workplaces
 - E. Other Units of Analysis
- III. Problems in Studying Work
 - A. Lack of Information
 - B. Hard-To-Measure Characteristics
- IV. Summary

Key Concepts

validity	achieved characteristics
reliability	labor force participation rate
ethnography	unemployment rate
participant observation	discouraged workers
nonparticipant observation	industry
experimental bias	occupation
Hawthorne Effect	occupational prestige
case study	establishment
sample survey	firm
sample	parent company
establishment surveys	subsidiary
establishment	conglomerate
response error	multinational company
labor force	interlocking directorates
ascribed characteristics	trade associations

Learning Objectives

1. Students should be able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the major research methods used by sociologists analyzing work, including ethnography, case study, and survey.

2. Students should be able to identify the units of analysis used in labor research.
3. Students should be able to distinguish between industry and occupation.
4. Students should be able to define and give examples of occupational prestige.
5. Students should be able to discuss problems in the sociological study of work.

Lecture Topics

1. Concepts versus operational definitions. Pick a hard-to-measure concept, such as the volume of unpaid work in the national economy, and ask the class to help you find a way to measure it. Leading questions can be used to have the class consider ethnographies, observation, and surveys as possible sources of data. The class should also be able to identify some disadvantages of these methods for studying the concepts.

An alternative version of this topic is to analyze a few articles that study work commitment, job satisfaction, or another somewhat subjective dependent variable. Explain to the class how the dependent variables were constructed. Include the original questionnaire design, if the article uses survey data. Invite the class to join you in a critique of these operational definitions.

2. The Case Study in Teaching. Following the lead of the Harvard Business School, many business schools teach using the case study method. You may review current cases from Harvard at http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/b01/en/cases/cases_home.jhtml Although the case studies mentioned in the text are developed for research rather than teaching purposes, you can teach one or two classes using the case study method, which requires posing questions or problems from the case for students to answer. Students need to purchase and read the case in advance. Even students who are not advanced can often develop sophisticated problem solutions or at least point to additional information they would need to devise a solution.
3. Business Journalism and Social Science. *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune* often contain articles about workers and the workplace. Using one of these articles as a starting point, evaluate the data as a social scientist would. If the journalistic data fail in terms of validity or reliability, ask the class what data would be more convincing and whether they believe such data could be collected at a reasonable cost. This lecture can lead into a deeper discussion of how social scientists look at the world, compared with journalists, bankers, managers, and others.
4. Multivariate analysis. Students understand intuitively the idea that analysts need to control for characteristics such as age, level of education, etc., to understand differences in labor force outcomes. Multiple regression provides one such technique. An example of an article you could work through with the class is

Thomas Rotolo and J. Miller McPherson, "The System of Occupations: Modeling Occupations in Sociodemographic Space," *Social Forces* 79,3 (March 2001: 1095-1130. Alternatively, using tables from the professional literature, discuss with the class the extent to which ascribed characteristics versus achieved characteristics still make a difference in earnings in the U.S. labor force.

5. Research in the Sociology of Work. Review the latest volume of *Research in the Sociology of Work* and discuss a contemporary research project. Some interesting volumes include Volume 20: *Gender and Sexuality in the Workplace* (2010), Volume 19: *Work and Organizations in China After Thirty Years of Transition* (2009), Volume 14: *Workforce Diversity* (2004).

Class Activities

1. The Job Portfolio. Ask students to identify three occupations in which they are interested, and use the resources provided by the U.S. Department of Labor to learn about these occupations. For example projections for new openings in the occupations can be found in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* or the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*. Many similar tools are available online at <http://www.bls.gov>. Students should also learn about the education level and other job requirements. This assignment can be added to the student's job portfolio.
2. Identifying industry and occupation. Prepare a number of index cards, each with the name of an industry or occupation on it. Pass these cards out to the members of the class. Ask the class to sort themselves by whether their card has the name of an industry or an occupation. Then ask the occupation card holders to go and stand beside the industry in which their occupation would be found. This exercise often demonstrates how some occupations (e.g., secretary, janitor, manager) are found in nearly every industry. This exercise also helps students who have difficulty distinguishing between industry and occupation.

Alternatively, you could ask students to rearrange themselves physically in order of what they perceive the prestige of the occupations to be. They can check their intuitions by looking at the occupational prestige scores used in the General Social Survey, available at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/>. Students are usually quite good at determining occupational prestige. The instructor might want to explain what this fact says about the reliability of the prestige scores.

3. Classifying Occupations. How do new occupations get classified? Chester Levine, Laurie Salmon, and Daniel H. Weinberg, "Revising the Standard Occupational Classification System," *Monthly Labor Review* (May, 1999): 36-45 describes the most recent classification of occupations. Its appendix shows the classification used in 1850. Invite your class to compare the current classifications (<http://www.bls.gov/bls/occupation.htm>) with the 1850 classification. Note, for example, that in 1850 occultists and ostlers were separate categories.

4. Practicing Table Reading. Bring copies of some new, but fairly complicated labor statistics tables to class. Some good sources for such tables are *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, *Monthly Labor Review*, and *Employment and Earnings*. Examples may also be downloaded from <http://www.bls.gov>. Distribute the tables in class, and then ask each student or a small group of students to read the table and draw three conclusions from it. This provides good practice in reading tables, and the conclusions can then be linked to substantive points made in Chapter 2.
5. Observation exercises. Ask the students to observe some workers unobtrusively. Examples of workers who can easily be observed are fast-food workers, waitpersons, cashiers, and others who work with the public. Ask the class to study how interactions do (or do not) vary among different workers, and between workers and different kinds of clients. Note: observation studies do not usually require IRB approval. However, please check with your campus research office before sending students out to conduct any research, including observational and survey research. Campuses differ in their requirements for instructors and students in their regulations to protect human subjects.
6. The Work History. Ask the students to take a work history from a retired person. A work history is a complete account of the working life of an individual, including periods of unemployment or out of the labor force. The work history should contain details of occupation, job duties, and type of employer. (Salary information may be too sensitive.) The class can compare these work histories in terms of the gender of the persons interviewed, the kinds of jobs they held, how much time they had spent in the labor force, etc. The work history describes one cohort over time; the survey describes all cohorts at a particular period of time. Please note preceding warning about the need to obtain clearance for any research involving human subjects.
7. Ethnography of film. Have students conduct an ethnography of work as portrayed in a popular film, such as *The Maid* (2010), *Humble Pie* (2010), *Adventureland* (2010), *Extract* (2010), or *Up in the Air* (2010). Students should keep careful notes while viewing the film and compare their findings about how work is portrayed in these films to the issues about work discussed in class and the text.

Examination items that test for knowledge and comprehension

Multiple choice items

1. What is a conglomerate?
 - a. a firm that employs workers of many occupations
 - b. a multinational company
 - c. a set of firms with interlocking directorates
 - d. a parent company with firms in different industries
 - e. a firm that specializes in cement and concrete

Answer: d Page: 50

2. What do occupational classifications identify?
 - a. the products a worker helps to produce
 - b. blue-collar, white-collar, or pink-collar work
 - c. the kind of work a worker does
 - d. for whom a worker works (for example, her/himself, a small firm, a multinational company, etc.)
 - e. how much training a worker has

Answer: c Page: 49

3. Ester Reiter's ethnography of Burger King (in Chapter 2) found that making hamburgers was a favorite task of the workers because
 - a. it was mechanized.
 - b. it eliminated social interaction with other employees.
 - c. it allowed workers some minimal discretion.
 - d. it was the major product of the fast food restaurant.
 - e. they had learned this task at home.

Answer: c Page: 37

4. The relative disadvantage of sample surveys is
 - a. response error.
 - b. lack of reliability.
 - c. lack of generalizability.
 - d. experimenter bias.
 - e. interviewer fatigue.

Answer: a Page: 42

5. To be counted as unemployed, a person
 - a. must be receiving unemployment compensation.
 - b. must have held a job at some time in the past.
 - c. must be actively seeking work.
 - d. must be registered at the state employment office.
 - e. must be at least 18 years of age.

Answer: c Page: 44

6. Sociologists who study work use as their unit of analysis all of the following EXCEPT
- a. the labor force.
 - b. the worker.
 - c. occupations.
 - d. income tax returns.
 - e. unions.

Answer: d Page: 48

7. The U.S. government definition of “unemployed” includes those who
- a. are temporarily not working because of illness, but hold a job.
 - b. are without a job but are actively searching for employment.
 - c. are over the age of 16 and who are not working at least 5 hours per week.
 - d. volunteer fewer than 20 hours per week.
 - e. work unpaid 15 hours or more in a family business.

Answer: b Page: 44

8. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines “discouraged workers” as those who
- a. report little or no job satisfaction.
 - b. do not make a living wage.
 - c. have ceased looking for employment.
 - d. have been black-listed by anti-union companies.
 - e. have low productivity

Answer: c Page: 45

9. “A branch of economic activity devoted to the production of a particular good or service” is the definition of
- a. a profession.
 - b. an industry.
 - c. an occupation.
 - d. a corporation.
 - e. an establishment.

Answer: b Page: 46

10. Workers in occupations that were traditionally filled by women are called
- a. white-collar workers.
 - b. blue-collar workers.
 - c. professionals.
 - d. technicians
 - e. pink-collar workers.

Answer: e Page 49

11. An establishment can be defined as
- a. a production site.
 - b. a firm.
 - c. a company.
 - d. a conglomerate.
 - e. a subsidiary.

Answer: a Page: 50

12. Industry classifications are based on which of the following?
- a. the specific skills a worker uses
 - b. the technology used in the workplace where the worker works
 - c. the products a worker helps to produce
 - d. the amount of status associated with a worker's job
 - e. the number of workers at a work site

Answer: c Page: 46

13. According to the textbook (Chapter 2), in what order should we read the parts of a table?
- a. entries; headline and source note; left-hand column ("stub") and column headings; footnotes
 - b. entries; left-hand column ("stub") and column headings; footnotes and source note; headline
 - c. headline; left-hand column ("stub") and column headings; footnotes and source note; entries
 - d. headline; left-hand column ("stub") and source note; column headings; footnotes
 - e. footnotes and source note; entries; left-hand column ("stub") and column headings; headline

Answer: c Page: 45

14. Background characteristics of survey respondents such as sex, race, or age are
- a. described.
 - b. pretested.
 - c. achieved.
 - d. ascribed.
 - e. ordinal.

Answer: d Page: 43

15. Which of the following is an achieved characteristic?
- a. race
 - b. age
 - c. years of schooling completed
 - d. number of brothers and sisters
 - e. sex

Answer: c Page: 43

16. A research technique that studies one establishment through the use of interviews, documents, and other materials is called
- a. a sample survey.
 - b. a work history.
 - c. an establishment survey.
 - d. a case study.
 - e. a non-participant observation.

Answer: d Page: 38

17. Organizational collaboration at GM was used as an example of which method of research?
- a. a sample survey of secretaries
 - b. analysis of government statistics
 - c. multiple regression analysis
 - d. a case study
 - e. historical research

Answer: d Page: 40

18. Two standards for evaluating the quality of data are
- a. skewness and deviation.
 - b. observation and surveying.
 - c. validity and reliability.
 - d. sample and population.
 - e. clarity and proportion.

Answer: c Page: 39

19. Who is counted in the numerator of the unemployment rate?
- a. the unemployed people
 - b. the members of the labor force
 - c. the employed people
 - d. the target population
 - e. the general population

Answer: b Page: 44

20. A labor force participation rate of 60% means that
- a. 60% of the people who want jobs have found them.
 - b. 60% of the target population is either employed or unemployed.
 - c. the unemployment rate is 40%.
 - d. only 10% of women are at work.
 - e. people are working at only 60% of their maximum efficiency.

Answer: b Page: 44

21. All noninstitutionalized persons over the age of 16 are eligible to be
- a. members of the labor force.
 - b. employed.
 - c. unemployed.
 - d. NILF.
 - e. all of the above

Answer: e Page: 44

22. The economically active population is an equivalent term to
- a. the labor force.
 - b. blue-collar workers.
 - c. the labor force plus the discouraged workers.
 - d. the employed minus the unemployed.
 - e. c and d

Answer: a Page: 44

23. The Standard Occupational Classification consists of
- a. major groups.
 - b. minor groups.
 - c. broad occupations.
 - d. detailed occupations.
 - e. all of the above

Answer: e Page: 49

24. How occupations are perceived by others is measured by
- a. occupational prestige.
 - b. socioeconomic status scores.
 - c. detailed occupation groupings.
 - d. mixed methods.
 - e. establishment surveys.

Answer: a Page: 49

25. Characteristics of work that are hard to measure often involve
- a. experimental bias.
 - b. the Hawthorne Effect.
 - c. both objective and subjective elements.
 - d. official labor force statistics.
 - e. sample surveys.

Answer: c Page: 51

Short Answer Questions

1. According to the government labor statistics, who is unemployed?

To be unemployed, a person must be non-institutionalized and over the age of 16, not working even one hour for pay or profit, not absent temporarily from a job, and actively seeking work, awaiting to report to a job within 30 days, or awaiting the results of a job search during the last 30 days.

2. Explain the difference between participant and non-participant observation.
3. Explain how a case study differs from a sample survey.

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Essay Questions

1. Why is the blue-collar, white-collar distinction outmoded?

Technology and the industrial shift in the labor force have made this classification obsolete. The blue-collar, white-collar distinction was developed for an older occupational classification, before the development of technicians who have characteristics of both groups and the large number of service workers who do not fit into this classification. Further, the 'pink-collar' distinction is sometimes made to identify the occupations that are female-dominant.

2. Why do work researchers care about the difference between ascribed and achieved characteristics of workers?
3. Identify several units of analysis that a social scientist might use to study work. Which units are appropriate for which kinds of questions?

Examination items that test for application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation

Multiple Choice Items

1. An ethnography differs from personal anecdote in that
- an anecdote is humorous.
 - not all anecdotes are about work.
 - the ethnographic observer is more detached and objective.
 - an ethnography is not about real people.
 - an ethnography is not reliable.

Answer: c Page: 36

2. A sociologist wants to know how satisfied workers at Company X are with their jobs. She goes to personnel records to find out how many years each worker has been with the company as an indicator of how satisfied they must be. One benefit of her method is that later researchers can easily use her method to produce the same data and results. A colleague argues with her, however, that years with the company is not an accurate measure of job satisfaction. The sociologist's method might be said to be
- reliable and valid.
 - reliable but not valid.
 - valid and generalizable.
 - valid but not reliable.
 - neither valid nor reliable.

Answer: b Page: 36

3. Michael is an 18-year-old high school student who lives with his parents and watches a lot of MTV. He has never held a job and has never looked for a job. How would Michael's labor force status be classified by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics?
- not eligible to be counted as a member of the labor force
 - a member of the labor force, but unemployed
 - employed in the labor force (as a student)
 - eligible to be counted as a member of the labor force but not actually in the labor force
 - able but not willing to work

Answer: d Page: 44

4. Which of the following correctly distinguishes case studies from ethnographies?
- a. Ethnographies are usually more limited in time, space, and types of data collected than case studies.
 - b. Case studies are usually done covertly; ethnographies usually require cooperation from management.
 - c. Ethnographies collect more varied types of data than case studies.
 - d. Case studies require participant-observation, while ethnographies can be done through participant-observation or nonparticipant-observation.
 - e. Case studies are unable to take the worker's perspective into account.

Answer: a Page: 39

5. A good survey includes all of the following EXCEPT
- a. valid questions.
 - b. a representative set of respondents.
 - c. minimal response error.
 - d. reliable questions.
 - e. experimenter bias.

Answer: e Page: 39

Questions 6-12 ask you to classify the following people, based only on the information provided, using the government's definition of the following terms. Each description refers to the person's situation during the reference week for the Current Population Survey. Each term may be used once, more than once, or not at all.

- a. employed
 - b. unemployed
 - c. not in the labor force
 - d. not in the target population
 - e. discouraged worker
-
- 6. Joe Miller, age 45, worked Tuesday through Friday at the Westview Widget Works. He took Monday off to attend a neighbor's funeral.
 - 7. Janella Miller, age 43, is a homemaker, but last week she substituted as a high school teacher for two days at Houston High School.
 - 8. Sharon Miller, age 17, spent four hours Friday evening and four hours Saturday evening baby-sitting for the Rodriguez family.
 - 9. Joey Miller, age 12, received \$5 from his parents for cleaning out the family garage on Saturday.
 - 10. Joe Miller's father, Walter Miller, age 77, is retired but spent the week sitting in the courthouse square and playing checkers. He won \$3 from Sam Smith by betting on the outcome of the checkers game.
 - 11. Clara Miller, Walter's wife, is age 75. She has stopped looking for work because she believes no one will hire a woman of her age.
 - 12. Casey Miller, Joe's brother, age 41, has been laid off from the Westview Widget Works. He registered with his union's hiring hall and sent a copy of his resume to two other factories.

Answer: 6, a; 7, a; 8, a; 9, d; 10, c; 11, e; 12, b

Page 43-46

13. When sociologists conduct sample surveys, they ask questions of a systematic sample of people. What is the relationship of the sample to the population of interest?
- a. The sample is the same as the population.
 - b. The sample is representative of the population.
 - c. The sample answers questions that the population refuses to answer.
 - d. The sample has a smaller response error than the population.
 - e. The sample represents only the working part of the population.

Answer: b Page: 40

14. Ethical issues are most likely to be posed by
- a. a sample that does not represent the population.
 - b. a study with experimenter bias.
 - c. a study with response error.
 - d. a covert study.
 - e. an establishment study.

Answer: d Page: 38

15. People who are 'with a job, but not at work' represent a sub-category of the
- a. employed.
 - b. unemployed.
 - c. discouraged workers.
 - d. NILF.
 - e. unpaid family workers.

Answer: a Page: 43

16. A researcher wants to demonstrate that in 2008 there are relatively more women engaged in paid labor than there were in 1958. The best measure for showing this change is
- a. the unemployment rate for women.
 - b. the labor force participation rate for women.
 - c. the number of women who are NILF.
 - d. the number of women who were covered by Social Security payroll taxes.
 - e. the number of women who filed federal income tax returns.

Answer: b Page: 44

17. Vivian is a college sophomore. She takes four courses at her college, which qualifies her for full-time status at the college. She also works 20 hours a week as a cashier at the Student Union. How is she classified in terms of the labor force?
- a. She is NILF because she is a full-time student.
 - b. She is in the labor force, but she is not counted as employed because she is a part-time worker.
 - c. She is in the labor force and she is employed.
 - d. Her classification depends upon whether she is younger than 18 years or older than 18 years.
 - e. Her classification depends upon whether she wants to work full-time or not.

Answer: c Page: 44

18. An unemployment rate of 5% means
- a. five out of every one hundred adults are unemployed.
 - b. five out of every one hundred people who want a job cannot find one.
 - c. five out of every one hundred experienced workers cannot find a job.
 - d. five out of every one hundred labor force participants are actively seeking work.
 - e. five out of every one hundred labor force participants are currently receiving unemployment compensation benefits.

Answer: d Page: 44

19. Which of the following yields the largest number of people?
- a. All the people who receive unemployment benefits.
 - b. All of the people who are unemployed.
 - c. All of the people who are unemployed plus discouraged workers.
 - d. All of the people who register for work at the state employment office.
 - e. All of the people who have stopped looking for work because they believe they cannot find it.

Answer: c Page: 44-45

20. Why does the government measure unemployment through the Current Population Survey?
- a. The government needs to know how many people will apply for unemployment compensation benefits.
 - b. The government needs to know how many people should pay income tax.
 - c. Private employers do not care about unemployment, and so no private-sector firm would collect unemployment data.
 - d. The level of unemployment is an indicator of the overall health of the economy.
 - e. Unemployment is too rare an event to be measured by the census.

Answer: d Page: 44

21. A case study of an establishment is most likely to present a misleading picture of the firm if
- a. the firm is publicly held.
 - b. the firm is a subsidiary.
 - c. the firm is a parent company.
 - d. the firm's parent company is a conglomerate.
 - e. the firm has only one establishment.

Answer: d Page: 50

22. An interlocking directorate is
- a. an illegal arrangement among businesses.
 - b. a geographic linkage among establishments.
 - c. a way that firms are linked through overlapping board memberships.
 - d. a government agency that produces labor statistics.
 - e. a trade association that regulates jigsaw puzzle production.

Answer: c Page: 50

23. In “Putting on the Hair Shirt,” (Box 2.2), the ethnographer demonstrated an ability to
- participate fully in the work group.
 - learn sensitive information about on-the-job failures
 - create a Hawthorne Effect.
 - operate covertly.
 - both a and c

Answer: b Page: 38

24. An advantage of multiple methods is
- less response error.
 - less experimental bias.
 - greater reliability.
 - greater government subsidy.
 - less attention to ascribed characteristics.

Answer: c Page: 39

25. In a certain industry, two large producers have just merged to form a much larger company. What indicator is most likely to reflect this change?
- the unemployment rate
 - the balance of trade deficit
 - the labor force participation rate
 - the occupational prestige scores
 - the four-firm concentration ratio

Answer: e Page: 47

Short Answer Questions

1. Assess three of the methods discussed in Chapter 2 in terms of their validity and reliability.

Answer: Observation, case study, and survey techniques may all be criticized for validity; reliability may be a less serious issue for a well-designed sample survey of adequate size.

2. Identify three methods used to classify occupations and briefly indicate the advantages of each.

3. Provide a table and ask the student to draw inferences from it.

Essay Questions

1. What are the shortcomings of the current method of measuring unemployment?

An answer might first identify ways in which the unemployment rate is too low: the elimination of discouraged workers from the count; the decision to count as employed someone working for only one hour, even if that person looks for work the rest of the week; the exclusion of younger teenagers from the count. An answer could also emphasize ways in which the count might be too high, including people who lie about whether they are really looking for work, and the inclusion of people waiting to report to a job or waiting for the results of a job search. Other approaches to this answer might note that the current method has no qualitative information and provides little sense of the impact of unemployment on the worker's family and community.

2. How does the choice of a unit of analysis affect the method that is appropriate for a study?
3. Corissa wants to study how unemployed people find jobs. Discuss two different ways in which she could do this study. Compare the advantages and the disadvantages of the two methods.