

# RESEARCH METHODS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

FOURTH EDITION

*Qualitative and  
Quantitative Approaches*

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## A Guide to Research Topics, Anyway

There may not be a list of research topics, but there are some useful guidelines. First of all, there are very few big-theory issues—I call them research *arenas*—in all of social science. Here are four of them: (1) the nature-nurture problem, (2) the evolution problem, (3) the internal-external problem, and (4) the social facts or emergent properties problem.

1. **The nature-nurture problem.** This is an age-old question: How much of our personality and behavior is determined by our genes and how much by our exposure to different environments? Many diseases (cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs, sickle-cell anemia) are completely determined by our genes, but others (heart disease, diabetes, asthma) are at least partly the result of our cultural and physical environment.

Schizophrenia is a genetically inherited disease, but its expression is heavily influenced by our cultural environment. Hallucinations are commonly associated with schizophrenia but when Robert Edgerton (1966) asked over 500 people in four East African tribes to list the behavior of people who are severely mentally ill, less than 1% of them mentioned hallucinations (see also Edgerton and Cohen 1994; Jenkins and Barrett 2004).

Research on the extent to which differences in cognitive functions of men and women are the consequence of environmental factors (nurture) or genetic factors (nature) or the interaction between those factors is part of this research arena (Caplan et al. 1997). So are studies of human response to signs of illness across cultures (Kleinman 1980; Hielscher and Sommerfeld 1985).

2. **The evolution problem.** Studies of how groups change through time from one *kind* of thing to another kind of thing are in this arena. Societies change very slowly through time, but at some point we say that a village has changed into a city or that a society has changed from a feudal to an industrial economy. All studies of the differences between small societies—**Gemeinschaften**—and big societies—**Gesellschaften**—are in this arena. So are studies of inexorable bureaucratization as organizations grow.
3. **The internal-external problem.** Studies of the way in which behavior is influenced by values and by environmental conditions are in this arena. Studies of **response effects** (how people respond differently to the same question asked by a woman or by a man, for example) are in this arena, too. So are studies of the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do.
4. **The social facts, or emergent properties problem.** The name for this problem comes from Emile Durkheim's (1933 [1893]) argument that social facts exist outside of individuals and are not reducible to psychological facts. A great deal of social research is based on the assumption that people are influenced by social

forces that *emerge* from the interaction of humans but that transcend individuals. Many studies of social networks and social support, for example, are in this arena, as are studies that test the influence of organizational forms on human thought and behavior.

*Generating Types of Studies*

Now look at table 3.1. I have divided research topics (not arenas) into classes, based on the relation among kinds of variables.

**TABLE 3.1**  
Types of Studies

	<i>Internal States</i>	<i>External States</i>	<i>Reported Behavior</i>	<i>Observed Behavior</i>	<i>Artifacts</i>	<i>Environment</i>
Internal states	I	II	IIIa	IIIb	IV	V
External states		VI	VIIa	VIIb	VIII	IX
Reported behavior			Xa	Xb	XIa	XIIa
Observed behavior				Xc	XIb	XIIb
Artifacts					XIII	XIV
Environment						XV

The five major kinds of variables are:

1. **Internal states.** These include attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions. Cognition is an internal state.
2. **External states.** These include characteristics of people, such as age, wealth, health status, height, weight, gender, and so on.
3. **Behavior.** This covers what people eat, who they communicate with, how much they work and play—in short, everything that people do and much of what social scientists are interested in understanding.
4. **Artifacts.** This includes all the physical residue from human behavior—radioactive waste, tomato slices, sneakers, arrowheads, computer disks, Viagra, skyscrapers—everything.
5. **Environment.** This includes physical and social environmental characteristics. The amount of rainfall, the amount of biomass per square kilometer, location on a river or ocean front—these are physical features that influence human thought and behavior. Humans also live in a social environment. Living under a democratic vs. an authoritarian régime or working in an organization that tolerates or does not tolerate sexual harassment are examples of social environments that have consequences for what people think and how they behave.

Keep in mind that category (3) includes both reported behavior and actual behavior.

A great deal of research has shown that about a third to a half of everything

people report about their behavior is not true (Bernard et al. 1984). If you want to know what people eat, for example, asking them is not a good way to find out (Basiotis et al. 1987; Johnson et al. 1996). If you ask people how many times a year they go to church, you're likely to get highly exaggerated data (Hadaway et al. 1993, 1998).

Some of the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do is the result of out-and-out lying. Most of the difference, though, is the result of the fact that people can't hang on to the level of detail about their behavior that is called for when they are confronted by social scientists asking them how many times they did this or that in the last month. What people *think* about their behavior may be what you're interested in, but that's a different matter.

Most social research focuses on internal states and on reported behavior. But the study of humanity can be much richer, once you get the hang of putting together these five kinds of variables and conjuring up potential relations. Here are some examples of studies for each of the cells in table 3.1.

**Cell I:**

The interaction of internal states, like perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, values, and moods.

Religious beliefs and attitudes about conservation and the environment (Nooney et al. 2003).

Perceived gender role (as measured with the Bem Sex Role Inventory) and attitudes about rape in Turkey (Gölge et al. 2003).

This cell is also filled with studies that compare internal states across groups. For example, Cooke's (2004) study of attitudes toward gun control among American, British, and Australian youth.

**Cell II:**

The interaction of internal states (perceptions, beliefs, moods, etc.) and external states (completed education, health status, organizational conditions).

Health status and hopefulness about the future (Vieth et al. 1997).

The relation between racial attitudes and the political context in different cities (Glaser and Gilens 1997).

**Cell IIIa:**

The interaction between *reported* behavior and internal states.

Attitudes toward the environment and reported environment-friendly behavior (Minton and Rose 1997).

Reported rate of church attendance and attitude toward premarital sex (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997).

**Cell IIIb:**

The interaction between *observed* behavior and internal states.

Attitudes and beliefs about resources and actual behavior in the control of a household thermostat (Kempton 1987).

The effect of increased overtime work on cognitive function in automotive workers, including attention and mood (Proctor et al. 1996).

**Cell IV:**

The interaction of material artifacts and internal states.

The effects on Holocaust Museum staff in Washington, D.C., of working with the physical reminders of the Holocaust (McCarroll et al. 1995).

The ideas and values that brides and grooms in the United States share (or don't share) about the kinds of ritual artifacts that are supposed to be used in a wedding (Lowrey and Otnes 1994).

How children learn that domestic artifacts are considered feminine while artifacts associated with nondomestic production are considered masculine (Crabb and Bielawski 1994).

**Cell V:**

The interaction of social and physical environmental factors and internal states.

How culture influences the course of schizophrenia (Edgerton and Cohen 1994).

The extent to which adopted children and biological children raised in the same household develop similar personalities (McGue et al. 1996).

**Cell VI:**

How the interaction among external states relates to outcomes, like longevity or financial success.

The effects of things like age, sex, race, marital status, education, income, employment status, and health status on the risk of dying from the abuse of illegal drugs (Kallan 1998).

The interaction of variables like marital status, ethnicity, medical risk, and level of prenatal care on low birth weight (Abel 1997).

The effect of skin color on acculturation among Mexican Americans (Vasquez et al. 1997).

**Cell VIIa:**

The relation between external states and *reported* behavior.

The likelihood that baby-boomers will report attending church as they get older (Miller and Nakamura 1996).

The effect of age, income, and season on how much leisure time Tawahka Indian spouses spend with each other (Godoy 2002).

Gender differences in self-reported suicidal behavior among adolescents (Vannatta 1996).

**Cell VIIb:**

The relation between external states and *observed* behavior.

Health status, family drug history, and other factors associated with women who successfully quit smoking (Jensen and Coombs 1994). (Note: This is also an example of Cell XIIIb.)

Observed recycling behavior among Mexican housewives is better predicted by their observed competencies than by their beliefs about recycling (Corral-Verdugo 1997).

**Cell VIII:**

The relation of physical artifacts and external states.

How age and gender differences relate to cherished possessions among children and adolescents from 6 to 18 years of age (Dyl and Wapner 1996).

How engineering drawings and machines delineate boundaries and facilitate interaction among engineers, technicians, and assemblers in a firm that manufactures computer chips (Bechky 2003).

**Cell IX:**

The relation of external states and environmental conditions.

How the work environment contributes to heart disease (Kasl 1996).

Relation of daily levels of various pollutants in the air and such things as violent crimes or psychiatric emergencies (Briere et al. 1983).

How proximity to a supermarket affects the nutrition of pregnant women (Laraia et al. 2004).

**Cell Xa:**

The relation between behaviors, as *reported* by people to researchers.

The relation of self-reported level of church attendance and self-reported level of environmental activism among African Americans in Louisiana (Arp and Boeckelman 1997).

The relation of reported changes in fertility practices to reported changes in actions to avoid HIV infection among women in rural Zimbabwe (Gregson et al. 1998).

**Cell Xb:**

The relation between reported and *observed* behavior.

Assessing the accuracy of reports by Tsimane Indians in Bolivia about the size of forest plots they've cleared in the past year by comparing those reports to a direct physical measure of the plots (Vadez et al. 2003).

The relation of reports about recycling behavior and actual recycling behavior (Corral-Verdugo 1997).

Comparing responses by frail elderly men to the Activities of Daily Living Scale with observations of those same men as they engage in activities of daily living (Skruppy 1993).

**Cell XIa:**

The relation of *observed* behavior to specific physical artifacts.

Content analysis of top-grossing films over 31 years shows that "tobacco events" (which include the presence of tobacco paraphernalia, as well as characters talking about smoking or actually smoking) are disproportionate to the actual rate of smoking in the population (Hazan et al. 1994).

**Cell XIb:**

The relation of *reported* behavior to specific physical artifacts.

People who are employed view prized possessions as symbols of their own personal history, whereas people who are unemployed see prized possessions as having utilitarian value (Ditmar 1991).

**Cell XIIa:**

The relation of *reported* behavior to factors in the social or physical environment.

The relation of compulsive consumer behavior in young adults to whether they were raised in intact or disrupted families (Rindfleisch et al. 1997).

**Cell XIIb:**

The relation of *observed* behavior to factors in the social or physical environment.

People are willing to wait longer when music is playing than when there is silence (North and Hargreaves 1999).

How environmental features of gay bathhouses facilitate sexual activity (Tewksbury 2002).

**Cell XIII:**

The association of physical artifacts to one another and what this predicts about human thought or behavior.

The research on how to arrange products in stores to maximize sales is in this cell.

Comparing the favorite possessions of urban Indians (in India) and Indian immigrants to the United States to see whether certain sets of possessions remain meaningful among immigrants (Mehta and Belk 1991). This is also an example of Cell IV. Note the difference between expressed *preferences* across artifacts and the coexistence of artifacts across places or times.

**Cell XIV:**

The probability that certain artifacts (relating, for example, to subsistence) will be found in certain physical or social environments (rain forests, deserts, shoreline communities). This area of research is mostly the province of archeology.

**Cell XV:**

How features of the social and physical environment interact and affect human behavioral and cognitive outcomes.

Social and physical environmental features of retail stores interact to affect the buying behavior of consumers (Baker et al. 1992).

The above list is only meant to give you an idea of how to think about potential covariations and, consequently, about potential research topics. Always keep in mind that *covariation does not mean cause*. Covariation can be the result of an antecedent or an intervening variable, or even just an acci-

dent. (Refer to chapter 2 for a discussion of causality, spurious relations, and antecedent variables.)

And keep in mind that many of the examples in the list above are statements about possible **bivariate correlations**—that is, about possible covariation between two things. Social phenomena being the complex sorts of things they are, a lot of research involves **multivariate relations**—that is, covariation among three or more things at the same time.

For example, it's well known that people who call themselves religious conservatives in the United States are likely to support the National Rifle Association's policy on gun control (Cell I). But the association between the two variables (religious beliefs and attitudes toward gun control) is by no means perfect and is affected by many intervening variables.

I'll tell you about testing for bivariate relations in chapter 20 and about testing for multivariate relations in chapter 21. As in so many other things, you crawl before you run and you run before you fly.