Chapter Six Support (Rubin and Babbie Text)

The following is the support for Chapter 6. It contains a discussion of the key concepts and chapter content that are necessary for the take-home quiz on this chapter as well as additional material that I would like you to understand as we head into the problem formulation part of the text and the course.

As the authors point out, social work research spans a wide variety of topics, including research relevant to numerous fields of practice and many social problem areas. The research is conducted at numerous “levels of analysis” as well, by which I mean it is characterized by research on “units of observation” which can be found at the individual level, the group level, and the organizational, community and societal levels of analysis. Let me explain what I mean by “levels of analysis”, so that you will not mix it up with “levels of measurement” discussed earlier (i.e. ION, interval, ordinal and nominal).

Topic, Subject, Object and Data at various Levels of Analysis

First, I want to discuss some general issues of research. I’ve snuck a few comments in here related to the quiz questions, but most of that is below.

In my paper posted to the website, “Teaching Yourself How to Write a Thesis”, I explain the distinction between the subject and object of research. The subject of research is related to the first step in defining a research question, “What Do I Want to Know?” The subject is the problem you are trying to address. Rubin and Babbie make a helpful distinction between topic and subject. They point out (p. 80) that “the treatment of sexually abused girls is a topic, not a research question.” It is a topic, not a the subject of your research on that topic!  

Don’t mix this up with the idea of the subjects in a research study, i.e. the respondents to a survey or the participants in an experiment. The object of research is a conceptualization of what it is that you are observing, in other words that aspect of social reality about which you are obtaining the data that will be used to study your subject. It could be some aspect of individual opinion (whether or not one believes SS will be there when you retire) or behavior (tailgating) that you would measure by survey research or participant observation or some other method, it could be something like unemployment that you would measure using census data. Object is a conceptualization of what is being observed, subject is what you want to know about that object, data is the specific information about the object that will be used to address the subject! Sexual abuse of girls may be the general topic, the subject might be the relationship between the role of maternal neglect in sexual abuse of girls, the objects (there can be more than one, which is often the case when there is a complex subject) are incidents of maternal neglect (or its absence) and sexual abuse among girls, the data might be Cornell’s database of anonymous state child protection records.

Ragin and Zaret distinguished between the object of research, which they briefly discussed are the observational units, and the subject of research, such as relationships
among variables (Ragin and Zaret 1983), the nature of a social mechanism (Swedberg 1993), or some other subject. In other words, what I refer to above as the “units of observation”, which can be studied at various levels of analysis, are generally what Ragin and Zaret mean by the object of research. This distinction is complex and must be discussed further. Ragin and Zaret only discussed it generally, but it stimulated me to think about this distinction again and again. I find it helpful in thinking through the logic of my research, and I hope you will as well.

The subject of research is a conceptualization of “what do you want to know” in relationship to the third question Howard Kimeldorf suggested be asked, namely, “what do you think the answer it”. So, for instance, I wanted to know about whether it was possible that the growth of the public and nonprofit sectors, the very social sectors we think of as responsible for the solving of urban social problems, might have contributed to them by taking too much land off the tax rolls! This was the subject of my research, but the object was the property valuations of that property in relation to the value of taxable property, studied over 50 years in Ohio’s urban areas: “The object of my quantitative historical comparative sociological research was the property valuation of real property in 17 urban cities and counties in Ohio since 1955.” Notice that I said that the object was property valuation. I didn’t say that the object was the Abstracts of Real Property and the Abstracts of Exempt Property, which were the public records from which I obtained my data. The object of research is not the data itself it is at a slightly higher level of abstraction, it is a conceptualization related to that data, i.e. unemployment or property valuation.

It took me a long time to come to an understanding of this distinction between the subject and object of research, and between the raw data and the object of research. I’m still involved in the process of understanding it. Learning is a lifelong endeavor, if you care to take it up! I want to share where I am at with you because I think that if you think critically about this distinction between subject and object of research, you will understand at the outset of your own research how to think logically about problem formulation and measurement, the subject of Part 2 of the text.

**Topic:** The overall, general subject of your research.  
**Subject:** The more specific topic, a conceptualization of the relationship between what it is you want to know and what you think the answer is, often expressed in terms of relationships between variables. The subject is related both to what is it that you want to know and what you think the answer it.  
**Object:** A conceptualization of what it is you will be studying (empirically) in order to approach your subject.  
**Data:** The actual data you will be using to measure the object of your study in order to be able to approach the subject of your study.

If, when formulating your problem, you distinguish between subject, object and data, you will be off to a good start. Once you have done that, determining the “level of analysis” of your “observational units” is simple. It is related to the object of your research, but it not exactly the same. For instance, if unemployment is the object of your research, you
could study unemployment at any one of a number of levels of analysis. You could use OECD data on unemployment levels in the nations of the Organization of European Cooperation and Development, in which case you are doing comparative crossnational research at the societal level of analysis. Or, you could study unemployment by looking at the psychosocial consequences of unemployment on individuals and families, as I did when I was an MSW student. I’ve posted my paper, Nobody Loves You When You’re Down and Out) on the website’s Research Proposal page, sans the bibliography, which I’ve not yet typed up from my old hard copy. I’m planning on updating this paper, and will refer to it later, since I see it as a model for how to review literature in order to inform practice. Here the level of analysis was individuals and families, although it was not actually a research study, it was a literature review. I didn’t, in that paper, look at the impact of unemployment on communities. While I looked at so-called “societal resources systems” and at the impact of unemployment on the fit between individuals and their environment, I didn’t review unemployment’s impact on communities or on societies or on organizations. Were this paper to have been a lit review that was preparing research, it would have been at the individual and family levels of analysis. The object of the research would have been the psychosocial consequences of unemployment on individuals and families. But wait, doesn’t that sound like a research topic, like a subject? Yes. That’s what it’s so hard to distinguish between the subject and object of research. It is very confusing! But you see the subject of research on the research for which the object is the “psychosocial consequences of unemployment on individuals and families” would be related to a research question or conceptual or empirical problem related to that object. Object is a conceptualization of what is being observed, subject is what you want to know about that object, data is the specific information about the object that will be used to address the subject!

Let’s Go to the Quiz Stuff

Okay, the above was an unpaid nonpolitical announcement, now let’s discuss material more closely related to the quiz!

First, I mentioned above that social work research can be about a lot of different topics, but one thing that the authors stress is that it often is applied research, in other words research which is undertaken with a view to the application of its findings to practice or policy. It is less likely to be what is known as pure research or basic research, aimed at developing new knowledge for it’s own sake. But that doesn’t mean that social work research isn’t related to theory.

There are a number of forms of theory that social work research relates to. First of all, social work researchers are trained in social science theory, and some of them are highly invested in testing sociological and psychological theories. Often, we do such research and publish it in journals in those fields, and often such research has no practical application, at least directly. Whether that should be considered social work research and whether social work faculty should be encouraged to do such research is a controversial issue. Some schools and programs hire people based upon their areas of research and stress applied research. Others are more open to social work faculty engaging in
sociological and psychological research or to doing social work research which is purely theoretical or primarily historical in nature. Furthermore, some applied research or research that has a practical nature can also manage to squeeze in theoretical content, not only to illustrate larger issues related to the research question but also because theory is not divorced from practice! Testing competing theories about human behavior or the nature of the social environment or about human needs, for instance, can have direct implications for what kinds of practice interventions or social policies we use and advocate. Furthermore, some “theories” are really methods of practice, models of practice, or modalities of practice or are closely related to them. Thus, social work research, while it is often atheoretical, need not be.

As the authors point out (p. 80 and again on p. 81 and yet again on p. 82), it is possible you may lack the cooperation you need. In their paragraph beginning “one time constraint” on page 81, they discuss this question in depth. This whole section, “attributes of a good research question” should be read carefully and studied as you begin to prepare for your group research projects. In fact, they point out that non-cooperation can even lead to resistance, and that can delay carrying out the research.

Furthermore, they point out that it’s easy to underestimate the costs of the time and materials you will need as well as to encounter entirely unexpected obstacles. I could probably list dozens from bugs in SPSS, to incompatibilities between SPSS and Excel (most of which were solved), to lack of unlimited number of columns in SPSS (now solved) to lack of unlimited line length for Ascii word processors (also now solved).

In general, you sort of have to do a feasibility analysis about each research study. Sometimes this will even result in your revising your research question, in fact that is often the case.

I like to make a big deal about exercising the sociological imagination when dreaming up research questions. In my Blinkpro bookmarks on Research Methods:

http://www.blinkpro.com/go?page=ShowShare&args=2&arg0=view&arg1=35513745

under the Research Proposal Development site, I have added a link to a Wikipedia discussion of C. Wright Mills work on sociological imagination. I think this is related to both applied research and other forms of research. The fact that research is related to guiding social welfare policy doesn’t mean it can’t be related to sociological theory. In fact, an entire issue of the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare was to be related to that very point! But the author’s definition of social work research is that it does have some relevance for guiding social welfare policy or social work practice, and they make the point that while research can be guided by curiosity or (presumably) the sociological imagination, it shouldn’t be purely based upon that. In fact, they stress it is important to do a review of the research literature at the outset, not put it off. The authors stress that in social work research, unlike in other disciplines, we select a topic that will help us deal with decisions which agencies need to make or which are related to social welfare policy. Generally, that is true, but some of us like to do other kinds of research as well!
Of course, when doing a literature review, one might wonder, who should you ask for help? Bertha Reynolds points that social workers “need to take exercise in being helped.” We strive to help others with our own professional skills, but when we are doing a literature review, we ought to seek help! Seeking help is important! Let me give you an example that stimulated the imagination of my son Mark when he was a boy! When there is something strange in the neighborhood, who you gonna call? When there is something weird, who you gonna call? When you’re seeing things running through your head, who you gonna call? When there’s an invisible man sleeping in your bed, who you gonna call? If you haven’t figured out the answer to this question see the answer on Research Stress Relief page!

http://www.chsbs.cmich.edu/michael%5Fdover/Research%20Methods%20Course/Research%20Humor.htm

Now, when you are doing a literature review, who do you call? Rui Wang the CMU Social Work Reference Librarian! Or, you can start by visiting her home page at:

http://www.lib.cmich.edu/subjectguides/socialsciences/socialwork.htm

And don’t let anyone tell you reference librarians are rarely helpful, that online searching has too many snafues and to do it the old fashioned way (searching the stacks) or that to take the opposite extreme you should never search the stacks because anything worthwhile is online! They truly are usually helpful. First of all, the most recent journal issues are often not on line yet, including the major journals collected in our JSTOR collection, although some of them may be available in more recent issues through various collections. Soon the Find It! feature of our CMU library will be updated and you will be able to see exactly what journals we have online more easily.

As the authors point out, you really need to consider literature reviews to be essential for bringing you up to date on the area you are researching. One way to organize your literature review is to sort your findings into two categories, one which shows findings on which most authors agree, and another which shows findings which are contradictory (about the same general research question, but with different findings). You should also try to summarize what progress has been made over time, in other words, how one study “outdoes” a previous study, how it is related to that study but goes beyond it. Finally, a good literature review mentions some of what I call the “related research”, i.e. research which isn’t on your topic exactly but contributes some related findings. In other words, don’t avoid citing studies that aren’t related directly to your research, as even work that is indirectly related is important to cite.

Again, don’t delay too long doing a literature review. Hop right on it and see if anyone else has asked a similar question. Your literature review can help guide your selection of a research question, help you identify measurement instruments that can be employed your study, and should help should point out any disagreements among previous researchers. Also, don’t worry if you find out someone has done similar research. Your
study CAN replicate a previous study, or it can study the same subject but from a different angle, or with a very different sample.

I’ve mentioned before, don’t go into too much detail, but one other thing: don’t thing you can disregard studies just because they are older or even “classic” studies. Some of the best research was done in the 1950s and 1960s, and that’s another reason to use the stacks, as many of those older studies aren’t available electronically. Also, don’t rely just upon the electronic indexes. They don’t all cover each issue cover to cover. It’s a good idea to examine the tables of contents of recent journals in particular.

A word on abstracts: Don’t avoid using them, they are helpful, even if brief. But don’t cite studies for your literature view on the basis of reading an abstract alone. I have a policy of not citing any article I haven’t copied and put on file or saved a PDF copy of and actually looked at. You need to confirm that the abstract is correct, for one thing, as they aren’t always written by the author. But some people consider it academically dishonest to act as if you have reviewed a study (by citing it) when you haven’t really done so.

In terms of my Teaching Yourself How to Write a Thesis paper, in the step about asking, “What do you think the answer is”, Howard Kimeldorf suggests asking as a sub-part: “What answers have others provided?” I begin the literature review in the second step, “Why do you want to know it?” I begin right there discussing why it is an important question and relating it to a distinct research tradition. Later, I discuss literature some more when I am in the “What Do You Think the Answer Is?” section, as it is there that I discuss my competing theses. In such a section you could review the literature about the kinds of hypotheses others have posted and what they found. Then you can state what you think you will find (your own hypothesis). But if you read my paper you will see that ultimately each researcher has to find the logic of their own research, and so I revised the steps Howard uses, incorporated some from David Tucker, and made up some of my own. You, too, can try to devise your own logic, your own steps, but it has to make sense to you and your reader, otherwise it is best to step with a standard format for writing a proposal or a report (in this case we’ll use the Rubin-Babbie steps in the appendices).

When you are doing your lit review, don’t try to include every detail in the literature, because doing so can detract from the study by making it too long. A better idea is to write one article that is a full literature review (which can include more detail) as well as the one that includes just that which you need to cover to preface the presentation of your own findings. The same thing goes with your research question itself. It should be narrow and specific, not broad. This frustrates some. They want to address larger questions, which are often what brought you to the topic. No problem. You can address them, just not (usually) answer them! Here it helps to use the procedures I outline in my paper, “Teaching Yourself...”. As part of the section on asking, “What Do You Want to Know,” first, discuss that originating question! Then discuss your specifying question. Finally, discuss the very specific subsidiary question your study will answer. In this way, even a very doable, seemingly narrow research question can be related to larger issues.
The authors claim that in addition to being narrow and specific, a good research question should be of potential relevance to social welfare policy and practice. That’s true, but “potential” means there is a lot of wiggle room to do research that is of potential value to social work but which is also an exercise in following the sociological imagination where it may lead you. Whatever you research question is, however, in addition to being at least potentially relevant to social work practice or social welfare policy, it should be capable of being answered by observable evidence that is at least potentially relevant to social work practice or social welfare policy.

The literature review usually should be conducted late in the research process.

a. True  
*b. False

The literature search should be augmented by examining the tables of contents in recent issues of professional journals.

*a. True  
b. False

In social work research, as distinguished from social scientific research in other disciplines, the impetus for selecting a topic should come from decisions that confront social service agencies or the information needed to solve practical problems in social welfare.

*a. True  
b. False