

Schwemmer, C., & Wieczorek, O. (2019). The Methodological Divide of Sociology: Evidence from Two Decades of Journal Publications. *Sociology*, 54(1): 3–21.



# Chapter 4

## THE METHOD OF SOCIOLOGY

In Chapter 4 we talked about method being at the heart of sociology – it is through methods that we *do* sociology by gathering data and reaching conclusions about the social world. In this Chapter we talked about the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative approaches are focused on the deep meanings of social phenomena so qualitative researchers use methods which can explore and untangle these meanings, while quantitative approaches are focused on numerical and statistical relationships and so use methods which generate (often large amounts of) numerical data.

Although mixed methods seem to offer an approach which could bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative research, sociology is still divided between these two ‘rival camps’ (Schwemmer and Wieczorek 2019: 4). Schwemmer and Wieczorek (2019) sought to understand just how deep this divide is in sociology. To do this, they looked at all academic articles published in ‘generalist Sociology’ journals between 1995 and 2017, aiming to establish whether there is a methodological divide, whether use of methods has changed over time, and how the methodological divide might reflect different ways of doing sociology in different contexts.

To do this, they employed quantitative content analysis methods which are also sometimes called ‘basic content analysis’ approaches. These approaches employ word or concept-counting techniques to make inferences about the importance or salience of a topic based on how many times it is referred to in a given piece of text (Neuendorf 2002). By mapping these word-counts over time, content analysts are able to draw conclusions about changes in society. This type of approach could be applied to all kinds of different texts such as policy documents, political speeches or works of fiction. Fisher and colleagues (2007), for example, used basic content analysis to explore ‘non-heterosexual’ behaviours and conversations on US television between 2000 and 2002. By compiling content from over 3,000 TV shows, they were able to show a slight increase in the depiction and discussion of LGBT issues from which we might infer a decrease in homophobic attitudes in society and certainly an increase in visibility of LGBT people.

To think about the methodological divide in sociology and what can be inferred from it, Schwemmer and Wieczorek (2019) took the abstracts of 8737 academic journal articles published in ‘generalist Sociology’ journals as their dataset (i.e. the content to analyse). An article abstract is a very short, concise description of the full

academic article that follows; it tells readers what the article is about, what methods were used, and what the main findings of the research are. While an abstract is usually around 200 words long, full academic articles in sociology are usually around 7,000 words. Abstracts are useful to help researchers figure out if an academic article is likely to be useful for them before they invest lots of time reading the full article!

Through content analysis of these abstracts, Schwemmer and Wieczorek were able to identify that there is still a persistent methodological divide in sociology. In other words, sociological research tends to be either qualitative or quantitative with very few projects using mixed methods, and very few writers moving between these two ‘rival camps’. They locate this divide within the historical story and development of sociology as a discipline which we talked about in Chapter 2. For Schwemmer and Wieczorek, the entrenchment of ‘rivalry’ between qualitative and quantitative approaches is rooted in different perspectives on ‘how to conduct research properly’ (page 4). Positivist researchers approach sociological research from an experimental perspective, seeking to generate testable hypotheses about social life, and so lean towards quantitative methods as the right way to conduct research. But interpretivist researchers tend to lean towards qualitative methods which generate data based on people’s perceptions and experiences of social life. This early divide in sociology, Schwemmer and Wieczorek argue, led to the contemporary methodological divide that we see in sociological research.

Unsurprisingly, they also note that ‘the methodological divide is accompanied by a differentiation in research topics’ (page 16), with quantitative researchers focused on issues of family structure, life course analysis and inequality and qualitative research most frequently used terms like ‘Weber’, ‘neo-liberal’, ‘Bourdieu’ and ‘social theory’ (page 13). This makes sense – topics like inequality or life course studies lend themselves to quantitative methods because they are about how ‘big’ social phenomena look, how society changes over time, or comparative distribution of things like wealth. Life course studies, for example, is concerned with how people’s lives pan-out over time using data like educational outcomes, health information, and statistics about marriages and children. While life course approaches *do* also use qualitative data, mapping how people’s lives look in society as a whole is a much more quantitative endeavour (see Giele and Elder 1998 for an overview). On the other hand, studies of individual lived experiences which aren’t intended to be generalisable are more suited to qualitative methods.

Schwemmer and Wieczorek look back to where the methodological divide in sociology comes from but they also think about what this means for the discipline’s future. They suggest that rivalries between qualitative and quantitative research ‘prohibit the exchange of ideas’ (page 17). They are concerned that this kind of ‘boundary demarcation’ between quantitative and qualitative work could ‘give way to an archipelago of sub-disciplines with their own domains of knowledge but a limited ability to produce new insights’ (page 17). In other words, qualitative and quantitative researchers, and researchers working in different fields, don’t talk to each other or work with each other enough which means that ideas aren’t shared and expanded across these methodological approaches. This would be bad news for sociology as a whole discipline. Rather than being a holistic field united by being ‘sociologists’,

Schwemmer and Wieczorek are concerned that the discipline would be broken up into sub-fields like ‘sociology of health’, ‘sociology of education’, ‘sociology of gender’ without overarching, shared ideas uniting us.

Schwemmer and Wieczorek’s quantitative content analysis gathered data specifically from 13 ‘generalist Sociology’ journals with ‘high impact factors’ (impact factors are often understood as objective markers of a journal’s quality). But what is a ‘generalist Sociology’ journal? And what counts as a ‘high impact factor’? The definitions of these concepts, and therefore the parameters of Schwemmer and Wieczorek’s dataset are subjective. This points to a broader issue in content analysis which is how researchers should select the materials that they will analyse the content of (i.e. their sample). Drisko and Maschi (2015) argue that sampling in content analysis is usually a multi-stage process where researchers begin with a very big sampling frame and then narrow it down until they arrive at a final sample which can still answer the research question, but which is manageable. Schwemmer and Wieczorek, for example, may have started off with a sampling frame of every sociology journal in the world (which would be huge!) but then removed specialist journals (e.g. journals focused specifically on criminology or sociology of education), then removed journals with low impact factors until they arrived at their final sample of 13.

But is 13 a big enough sample? Well, this depends on what the intention of the content analysis is. Schwemmer and Wieczorek’s analysis is what we might call ‘exploratory’. Drisko and Maschi (2015 :33) suggest that an exploratory content analysis is concerned with discovering new knowledge or uncovering unknown information about a specific event, situation or experience and so usually uses smaller sample sizes. In contrast to exploratory content analysis, ‘descriptive’ analysis which uses much larger samples and often longitudinal approaches to build new theories about a sample or population. So, 13 generalist sociology journals may well be enough to explore the methodological divide in sociology. As with most research, what’s vital is the methodological detail that researchers provide to explain their sampling so that readers can understand why the researchers decided on the sample size and how it answers the research questions.

## QUESTIONS:

1. If you were going to conduct a content analysis of sociology journals, how would you design your sample?
2. Using Geocoding software, Schwemmer and Wieczorek discovered that 76% of the articles that they looked at were written by authors in the UK or the USA. What might we infer from this? Hint: think back to Chapter 2 where we discussed the construction of Sociology’s history.
3. Is the methodological divide in sociology a problem?

## REFERENCES

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