Intersections: W^5

(What, Where, When, Why, Who)?

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ABSTRACT

James Frideres reviews best practices in modern research methods and discusses the importance of developing a theory of intersections that will not only acknowledge their existence, but quantify their linkages and impact. He compares the positivist approach with that of the postmodernists, which he criticizes for its poor design and lack of proper methodology.

The concept of intersection is a standard term in the language of the academy and government and well understood by its users, e.g., practioners and policy makers. For example, medicine has long noted that Position Emission Tomography (PET) scan results can be affected by a person's age, medical history, medications, as well as other physical factors. Thus, in order to properly interpret the results, these conditions must be known, the values of each calculated, and then figured into the calculus as the image is interpreted. The concept of intersections has been part of the language used by social scientists for many years and was commonly used in research carried out in the sixties and seventies. However, it fell out of favour during the past quarter century as many researchers began to engage in post-modernist 'research' and did not know how to ferret out the effects. Yet one school of social scientists has continued to use the concept in its research in an attempt to better understand social behaviour. This short essay will identify the meaning of the concept, how one group of social scientists has used the concept, and suggest how researchers, practioners and policy makers might more profitably ensure that intersection analysis is carried out.

Understanding Intersections

The concept of intersections refers to the joint effects of various social factors affecting human behaviour. Not surprisingly, the concept of intersections in its modern-day use is most salient in feminist literature. While feminist interpretation has its historical legacy in the disciplines of demography and economics, it reflects the understanding that individuals' lives are complex, multifaceted, and situated in social contexts that require mediated compromises. Many researchers (Brewer et al, 2002; Deaux 2001) have come to recognize the importance of the interlinkages of different attributes of individuals—such as race, class, sexuality—as having an impact upon the quality of life and life chances of individuals. They have clearly understood the connectedness of different social attributes of people and how this impacts on their behaviour. Other disciplines also have come to recognize the significance of intersections; but they have not yet developed a strategy to address these concerns or develop techniques to interpret the results. In a similar fashion, policy makers have come to recognize the issue of intersection, but have not been able to develop policies to address those intersections because researchers have not clarified the salience, importance, and nature of the linkages.

The Positivist Wing

There has been one school of the social sciences that has not only recognized the importance of the issue of intersections for some time, but has also developed a strategy to deal with it. These positivists engage in quantitative social science research. They have understood the concept from a theoretical, methodological, and statistical perspective. Moreover, they have recognized the necessity of quantifying these linkages and their impacts.

Experimentation: Classic Comparison and Control

From a methodological perspective, researchers must understand the concept of research design and its importance to interpreting the results of their research efforts. Central to the issue of research is the concept of comparison and control. Any time research results are presented, the researcher, the policy maker, the practioner, all ask: "Compared to what?" In short, the amount may be equal to, higher than or lower than some other group to which you compare the data. But the fact is, comparison must be performed in order to make sense out of the data. In summary, all research must have a comparison group and the lack thereof can result in major social and legal consequences (See P. Good's, *Applying Statistics in the Courtroom*). Thus all good research will have at least one comparison group and preferably more than one. For example, discrimination does not exist in a vacuum; it can be found only in the unequal treatment of people in similar

circumstances. The goal is to identify a similarly situated class so as to isolate the factor allegedly subject to impermissible discrimination. You cannot develop one policy for immigrants if you are simply comparing the income of different ethnic groups. You must be able to compare groups that are equal, for example, if some are recent immigrants while others have resided in Canada for long periods of time, this would not be a proper comparison. In short, the similarly situated group must be a control group (Good, 2001). And that takes us to the second methodological issue: control.

When research is carried out, the researcher wants to attribute the results to the 'treatment' or the independent variable under consideration. As a core issue, the researcher wants to control or 'hold constant' all influences except that which is under study. This means that the research design needs to be fashioned in such a way that the variable under consideration can be assured as the one producing the effect that the researcher is claiming. In this respect, other factors or variables, as explanatory variables, must be eliminated or at least accounted for. Every study has to involve at least two groups of subjects—those who were exposed to the 'event,' the 'condition,' the 'drug,' and those who were not. For example, in the evaluation of a medical treatment, you would need a group who were administered the drug Motrin versus aspirin. However, it would give you more confidence in assessing the effects of Motrin if another group were established; those who were given the drug Motrin and those who were not (either absent or through a placebo procedure). There are other types of research designs that can be employed to deal with the control-comparison issues raised above. Panel, longitudinal, and quasi-experimental designs can be constructed to address these issues in a satisfactory and appropriate manner. However the goal is not to present a lecture on methodology, but rather to inform the reader that this condition is central to carrying out research. Unfortunately, many postmodernists have ignored the importance and significance of proper research design, whose meaningful results could be used in the design of policies and/or programs.

Some researchers may argue that this kind of research is expensive, time consuming, and difficult to carry out. While I cannot disagree with this concern, I would offer the following responses. First, research is expensive and it makes more sense to have fewer 'good science' projects underway than lots of poor science research efforts under way. No one suggests that chemistry should use cheap science to develop new materials. Second, other disciplines such as medicine and science, have come to the realization that research design is the foundation for establishing valid and reliable results. The behavioural scientists cannot accept anything less. Finally, social scientists would find that the results from these types of 'good' research efforts would instill confidence in policy makers and practioners to take the results and craft their real life responses on the basis of these research results.

Statistics: An Alternative Solution

Even medical and science researchers are subject to limitations in developing research designs that allow them to assess the impacts of various factors that intersect and 'cause' the effect. One alternative way of dealing with the problem of intersections of variables is to use a statistical technique called multivariate regression—a technique that statistically 'controls' for the impact and intersection of other variables. There are many different variations of this technique and there are few databases where some form of this technique could not be utilized. It also allows the researcher to assess the interaction effects of two or more variables. That is, when two variables that normally would have an independent impact on the 'effect' variable are combined, they produce a different effect. It also allows the researcher to find out whether the two factors actually overlap and have no or little independent effects, e. g., race and ethnicity. The use of these multivariate techniques enables a researcher to untangle relationships that have been obscured by the complexities of real human systems. This technique is a whole that is made up of parts, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

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To bring this back to the issue at hand and less a technical discussion, if a researcher is interested in the impact of sex, race, ethnicity, immigrant vs. Native-born, and income (the independent variables) on life quality (the dependent variable), you could easily assess the independent and combined impact of each or all of the variables at the same time through the use of a multivariate statistical methodology. Using this technique you can show the impact of sex on the dependent variable (when all the other factors are held constant). Then, at the end, you can see the weight (some might say importance) of how each factor affects the dependent variable. Even if you had two or more dependent variables, this statistical technique is useful. Finally, if you want to know the interaction of the independent variables (e.g., sex, race, ethnicity) this technique can also provide you with an answer.

Critics will claim that the quantification process distorts reality and doesn't allow the researcher to capture reality. First of all, the division of the world into qualitative and quantitative no longer makes sense when doing research. Once you are able to develop categories of behaviours, the distinction becomes meaningless. Multivariate regression techniques can deal with qualitative data just as well as with quantitative data. On the other hand, if the focus of the argument is 'capturing the process,' I would quite agree that good ethnographic data is needed to inform the quantitative analysis. But this is an issue we now turn to.

Theory

While the above discussion has focused on methodological issues regarding intersections, perhaps an equally important issue facing social scientists is developing a theory on intersections. In the implementation of research design or through the use of statistical methodology, one of the biggest issues is relevance and importance of factors (variables). We must begin to develop a strong theory of intersections to show how some or all of the factors are linked to outcomes of social behaviour. Statistical methods can provide some basis for this theory and certainly there is a continuous feedback loop between theory and research, but more extensive theoretical expositions are need to develop a better understanding as to which of the factors need to be considered in an intersections paradigm and how they link with each other. Here is where qualitative researchers can enter the picture.

To begin, we need to have more ethnographic research in the area of intersections in order to unpack the process of how sex, ethnicity, and language, for example, intersect on some aspect of quality of life, e.g., labour force participation, and how they impact the lives of individuals, e.g., type of housing, level of education. Qualitative research is a procedure by which process can be better understood and thus form the foundation of theory building. However, this technique is unable to disentangle the joint effects of variables and that is where the use of quantitative procedures is invaluable. For example, as Siemiatycki et al (2003) have noted, immigrant communities are hardly monolithic; rather differences of gender, class, and language have revealed fragmentation and tension within them. They go on to argue that it is erroneous to consider them as homogenous, each with its fixed internal ties and defined boundaries. This is where qualitative researchers excel and could make a major contribution to the development of a theory of intersections. Unfortunately, many qualitative researchers have not focused their efforts on such endeavors. However, it is clear that if any theory is not well developed, the use of statistical procedures that omit certain important variables are of limited use and yet unless they are identified, we will not be able to develop a useful theory that will help guide policy development and programs.

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Conclusion

The need for a conceptual framework is crucial in developing an understanding of how various social attributes of individuals come to impact upon their lives. Moreover, structural variables need to be added to building a theoretical model of intersections. For example, in the area of health, the effects of neighborhood on health are both profound and startling. While the impacts are differential, i.e., they impact ethnic groups differently, the inclusion of this variable into the model is important for assessing health levels of various members of a community. The work of Anisef and Kilbride (2003) suggests this neighborhood effect is also present when working with ethnic groups. This reinforces the need for including both individual as well as structural factors into any theory of intersections.

Given that we all have many individual traits that we hold simultaneously, what is/are the most important? Qualitative researchers need to focus their efforts on defining the 'master traits' that are most influential. The concepts of 'situation' and 'instrumentality' are important yet neglected factors in developing a theory of intersections. For example, since we know that situational contexts influence people's behavior, what are the peripheral factors that are contextually important? How then can we incorporate this factor into a model of intersections? This is where good exploratory, ethnographic research can come to the aid of theory building. Unfortunately, the new postmodernist perspective has forgotten the importance of methodology in carrying out research and their approach is inappropriate for either exploring or developing theories. However, good ethnographies, using their ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the issue and developing explanations of the process, can proceed to build theories and construct hypothesis for testing. Here is where the quantitative methodologists can take over and fill in the gap to provide answers to the question of intersections. Finally, we must insist on good methodology in carrying out research. Current designs that ignore control-comparison issues, that lack random samples, and do not address either external or internal validity should not be funded nor used as basis for policy or program formation.

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