Units of Analysis

Social interactions form another class of social artifacts suitable for social scientific research. Weddings would be an example. Weddings might be characterized as racially or religiously mixed or not, religious or secular in ceremony, resulting in divorce or not, or they could be characterized by descriptions of one or both of the marriage partners. Realize that when a researcher reports that weddings between partners of different religions are more likely to be performed by secular authorities than those between partners of the same religion, the weddings are the units of analysis and not the individual partners to them.

Other examples of social interactions that might be the units of analysis in social scientific research are friendship choices, court cases, traffic accidents, divorces, fistfights, ship launchings, airline hijackings, race riots, and congressional hearings.

Unit of Analysis of Review

The purpose of this section has been to stretch your imagination somewhat regarding possible units of analysis for social scientific research. Although individual human beings are typically the units of analysis, that need not be the case. Indeed, many research questions can more appropriately be answered through the examination of other units of analysis.

The concept of the unit of analysis may seem more complicated than it needs to be. It is irrelevant whether you classify a given unit of analysis as a group, a formal organization, or a social artifact. It is essential, however, that you be able to identify what your unit of analysis is. You must decide whether you are studying marriages or marriage partners, crimes or criminals, corporation or corporate executives.

Unless you keep this point in mind constantly, you run the risk of making assertions about one unit of analysis based on the examination of another.

To test your grasp of the concept of units of analysis, here are some examples of real research topics. See if you can determine the unit of analysis in each. (The answers are at the very end of this chapter.)

(1) ... women watch TV more than men because they are likely to work fewer hours outside the home than men... Black people watch an average of approximately three-quarters of an hour more television per day than white people.

(Hughes 1980:290)

(2) Of the 130 incorporated U.S cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants in 1960, 126 had at least two short-term nonproprietary general hospitals accredited by the American Hospital Association.

(Turk 1980:317)

(3) The early TM organizations were small and informal. The Los Angeles group, begun in June 1959, met at a member's house where, incidentally, Maharishi was living.

(Johnston 1980:337)

(4) However, it appears that the nursing staff's exercise strong influence over ... a decision to change the nursing core system... Conversely, among those decisions dominated by the administration and the medical staffs...

(Comstock 1980:77)

(5) In 1958, there were 13 establishments with 1,000 employees or more, accounting for 60 percent of the industry's value added. In 1977, the number of this type of establishment dropped to 11, but their share of industry value added had fallen to about 48 percent.

(York and Persigehl 1981:41)

(6) Though 667,000 out of 2 million farmers in the United States are women, women historically have not been viewed as farmers, but rather as the farmer’s wife.

(Votaw 1979:8)