

How Social Psychologists Conduct Their Research

By [Kendra Cherry](#) | Updated on September 24, 2019

Social psychology [research methods](#) allow psychologists to get a better look at what causes people to engage in certain behaviors in social situations. In order to empirically study social behavior, psychologists rely on a number of different scientific methods to conduct research on [social psychology](#) topics. These methods allow researchers to test hypotheses and theories and look for relationships between different variables.

Why do people do the things they do? And why do they sometimes behave differently in groups? These questions are of interest not only to social psychologists, but to teachers, public policy-makers, healthcare administrators, or anyone who has ever watched a news story about a world event and wondered, "Why do people act that way?"

Which type of research is best? This depends largely on the subject the researcher is exploring, the resources available, and the theory or hypothesis being investigated.

Why Do Psychologists Study Social Behavior?

Why study social behavior? Since so many "common sense" explanations exist for so many human actions, people sometimes fail to see the value in scientifically studying such behaviors. However, it is important to remember that folk wisdom can often be surprisingly inaccurate and that the scientific explanations behind a behavior can be quite shocking.

[Milgram's infamous obedience experiments](#) are examples of how the results of an experiment can defy conventional wisdom.

If you asked most people if they would obey an authority figure even if it meant going against their moral code or harming another individual, they would probably emphatically deny that they would ever do such a thing. Yet Milgram's results revealed that 65 percent of participants would hurt another person simply because they were told to do so by an authority figure.

It is important to utilize the [scientific method](#) to study psychological phenomena in an objective, empirical, and analytical way.

By employing the scientific method, researchers can see cause-and-effect relationships and generalize the results of their experiments to larger populations.

While common sense might tell us that opposites attract, that birds of a feather flock together, or that absence makes the heart grow fonder, psychologists can put such ideas to the test using various research methods to determine if there is any real truth to such folk wisdom.

Descriptive Research

The goal of descriptive research is to portray what already exists in a group or population.

One example of this type of research would be an opinion poll to find which political candidate people plan to vote for in an upcoming election. Unlike causal and relational studies, descriptive studies cannot determine if there is a relationship between two variables. They can only describe what exists within a given population.


An example of descriptive research would be conducting a survey to find out people's [attitudes](#) toward a particular social issue such as divorce, capital punishment, or gambling laws.

Common Types of Descriptive Research

Some of the most commonly used forms of descriptive research utilized by social psychologists include:

Surveys

Surveys are probably one of the most frequently used types of descriptive research. Such surveys usually rely on [self-report inventories](#) in which people fill out questionnaires about their own behaviors or opinions.



The advantage of the survey method is that it allows social psychology researchers to gather a large amount of data relatively quickly, easily, and cheaply.

The Observational Method

This involves watching people and describing their behavior. Sometimes referred to as field observation, this can involve creating a scenario in a lab and then watching how people respond or performing [naturalistic observation](#) in the subject's own environment.

Each type of observation has its own strengths and weaknesses. Researchers might prefer using observational methods in a lab in order to gain greater control over possible extraneous variables, while they might prefer using naturalistic observation in order to obtain greater ecological [validity](#). However, lab observations tend to be more costly and difficult to implement than naturalistic observations.

Case Studies

A [case study](#) involves the in-depth observation of a single individual or group. Case studies can allow researchers to gain insight into things that are very rare or even impossible to reproduce in experimental settings.

The case study of [Genie](#), a young girl who was horrifically abused and deprived of learning language during the critical period, is one example of how a case study can allow social scientists to study phenomena that they otherwise could not reproduce in a lab.

Related: [Types of Psychological Research](#)

Correlational Research

Social psychologists use [correlational research](#) to look for relationships between variables. For example, social psychologists might carry out a correlational study looking at the relationship between media violence and [aggression](#). They might collect data on how many hours of aggressive or violent television programs children watch each week and then gather data how on aggressively the children act in lab situations or in naturalistic settings.

Conducting surveys, directly observing behaviors, or compiling research from earlier studies are some of the methods used to gather data for correlational research. While this type of study can help determine if two variables have a relationship, it does not allow researchers to determine if one variable causes changes in another variable.

While the researcher in the previous example on media aggression and violence can use the results of his study to determine if there might be a relationship between the two variables, he cannot say definitively that watching television violence causes aggressive behavior.

Related: [Do Children Learn Violence Through Observation?](#)

Experimental Research

Experimental research is the key to uncovering causal relationships between [variables](#). In experimental research, the experimenter randomly assigns participants to one of two groups:

1. **The Control Group:** The control group receives no treatment and serves as a baseline.
2. **The Experimental Group:** Researchers manipulate the levels of some [independent variable](#) in the experimental group and then measure the effects. Because researchers are able to control the independent variables, experimental research can be used to find causal relationships between variables.

So if psychologists wanted to establish a causal relationship between media violence and aggressive behavior, they would want to design an [experiment](#) to test this hypothesis. If the [hypothesis](#) was that playing violent video games causes players to respond more aggressively in social situations, they would want to randomly assign participants to two groups. The control group would play a non-violent video game for a predetermined period of time while the experimental group would play a violent game for the same period of time.

Afterward, the participants would be placed in a situation where they would play a game against another opponent. In this game, they could either respond aggressively or non-aggressively. The researchers would then collect data on how often people utilized aggressive responses in this situation and then compare this information with whether these individuals were in the control or experimental group.

Why Social Research Methods Are Important

The study of human behavior is as complex as the behaviors themselves, which is why it is so important for social scientists to utilize empirical methods of selecting participants, collecting data, analyzing their findings, and reporting their results.

By using the scientific method, designing an experiment, collecting data, and analyzing the results, researchers can then determine if there is a causal relationship between media violence and violent behavior.

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