

## **C. 1: Analytical Methods and Approaches for Latin American Studies**

Anil Hira

Simon Fraser University

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### Interdisciplinarity and Area Studies Controversies

How and why does one study a region? The advantage of studying a region is that one is able to more fully understand a place through utilizing a variety of disciplinary approaches. This allows one to gain a much deeper and more complex understanding not only of the region, but of human social behaviour. Gaining a complete understanding of a region requires developing skills from anthropology, sociology, history, political science, international relations, economics, and literature, and may include other subjects, such as archaeology, depending on one's particular interest. How can one master all of these approaches simultaneously? The obvious answer is that one can not. What we find in practice is that professors of Latin American studies tend to be trained in a particular discipline, however, they enrich their understanding by partaking and following relevant discussion in other disciplines. In the classroom, discussions can be far more interesting than in disciplinary courses because students come at a topic from different angles and approaches. A student can thus set up a particularly enriching program through Latin American studies by exposing him or herself to an appropriate mix of courses in different areas.

Latin American studies hangs together by virtue of a geographic space. But there have been many questions raised in academics about the appropriateness of area studies in a post Cold War world. Most area studies centers were set up by the U.S. and other governments during the post World War II period of high tension with the Soviet Union. The idea was to train scholars who would be intimately familiar with a region, so that they could engage in development projects and advise on security and democratization processes. Their expertise was funded to prevent the region from falling into Communism. While most Latin American scholars are on the left in their opinions, much of the research money has and continues to come from governments, and to a much lesser extent, foundations set up and funded by wealthy individuals and corporations. These monies have recently shrunk in response to the perception that, with the end of the Cold War in 1989 (as the Soviet Union and the threat of Communism collapsed), area studies have become passé, with the possible exception of Middle East studies for obvious reasons. A number of scholars have claimed that with globalization, whether we are focusing on development, democratization, or the role of the media, we must be international in our study.

My own conclusion is to acknowledge the changes in international relations, without conceding that area studies are no longer relevant. While we can recognize that there has been a rise of a global media, for example, CNN is heard around the world, the role of the media varies enormously from one region and one country to another. In a number of Latin American countries, such as Mexico, there is a strong national cultural

tradition that produces its own programs, films, and literature that can compete with U.S. imports. In other countries, such as Panama, the possibilities for a strongly independent cultural production seem less likely, but the precise role of the media and how it filters to different groups in society is unique in each locale. While we must acknowledge that there is enormous variety within Latin America, we also see some common elements that distinguish it from other regions of the world. Having a knowledge of the factors particular to a region, country, or locality, in other words, is crucial to understanding how global forces play out there.

Latin America, as we will see in Chapter 2's historical background, is a region defined by geography, a common history, and similar cultural background and social structures. It makes sense, therefore, at this level, to distinguish the strong role of the Catholic Church in Latin American history, from any other developing region. Latin America also has a unique and important indigenous tradition, as well as a mix of African culture through the slave trade, all of which has created a unique and inimitable culture. Latin American literature, though highly varied, is known for example, for the innovation of "magical realism," which has become internationally famous. Latin America has a different demographic mix and set of issues than any other region, and has always been looked at as a repository of agricultural and mineral wealth for the world. Latin America has also been defined by its close proximity to, and domination by, the U.S.

We can see that a good case can be made for both the interdisciplinary and area studies approaches. We can also see that the unique features and common factors distinguish Latin America from other regions of the world, while recognizing the important differences within the region itself. By beginning with understanding the issues common to Latin America through this book, you can then move on to studying the problems unique to particular Latin American countries in comparative perspective further in your studies.

### Deductive and Inductive Approaches in Latin American Studies

In the social sciences, we often distinguish between the inductive and the deductive sources of inquiry. By inductive methods, we refer to looking closely at the details of a case, and *then* proposing general propositions to explain it. For example, an anthropologist may study the religious beliefs of a tribal group in the Amazon and then suggest that these beliefs are related in part to the group's interactions with its ecosystem. Whether this proposition is true or not will have to be tested out through a study of the degree to which the explanation seems to make sense, as well as alternative explanations. It is likely that the group itself will see its interactions in a completely different way.

The deductive method of the social sciences involves suggesting a general hypothesis or proposition and then testing it out on a variety of cases. For example, we may posit that democracies are less capable of economic management than military governments. We would then create a data set of democracies and their economic

performance and then test it out against military governments' performance. (A number of studies have found that there is no clear relationship).

Some social scientists claim that the deductive method of analysis is the only approach that makes sense if we want to make wider claims about human behavior. They believe that creating falsifiable hypotheses and then testing them out against evidence in a quasi-scientific fashion is the only way to create a cumulative body of knowledge. If we start with a case, they claim, we will only find out more about the particularities of the case, not the extent to which the case can tell us about other cases. As you can surmise, all of this touches directly on the area studies and disciplinary approaches controversies we have discussed above. My own conclusion is that a combination of approaches makes the most sense. In my own research, I try to ask questions that will touch on a wide variety of phenomena, so that I am not spending too much time learning or telling the story of one case's particularities. In other words, I believe social science should be purposeful for solving public problems. That seems to be the motivation of most people who study social science. However, I also recognize that the particularities of a case, when exposed to an overriding question, can be enormously important. For example, the question of how Costa Rica has survived without a standing army is a unique but intensely interesting phenomenon, with potentially wider implications for dealing with the military in the rest of Latin America.

The most important thing to remember is that we are only as good as the questions we ask, and the methods we use to solve them. We can not, as scholars, look only for things that affirm what we want to see. Having the own humility to recognize that we are filled with blind spots and biases from our own limited experience and education pushes us to asking more challenging questions, which, in turn, lead to a much more revealing and thorough understanding of human behaviour (and our place in it).

### Levels of Analysis

The levels of analysis issue from international relations theory is similar to the question of the relevance of area studies. By level of analysis, we mean whether one studies phenomena at the international, national, or local level. International relations scholars like to distinguish between the arena of actions among nations from the action at the domestic and local levels. They would be less concerned, for example, about President Hugo Chavez's censure of the media than the effect of instability in Venezuela on oil shipments to the U.S. However, we can see from this very example that the two are intimately related, at least in this case. We can also see that, when properly posed, investigation at the local level, for example, Chavez's relationship with the state oil company, Pedvesa, and even at the individual level, Chavez's personality, could all be helpful in understanding the wider implications of Venezuela's politics for international oil shipments and US-Venezuelan relations.

This might lead us to conclude that any level of analysis would be appropriate in any case, given the interrelatedness of everything to everything. While we might better recognize the unique features of Latin America as a region, if we followed such logic, we

could keep moving downwards to the local, and even individual levels of differentiation. Not only would this cause us to mix up the interaction among different types of units- eg individuals, organizations, countries, and regions- but it would also make it difficult for us to reach conclusions that could apply to other units at a similar level. Most individuals do not affect other nations. At the same time, we would want to keep closely in mind the enormous differences, for example, between Colombia's political system and Venezuela's. In the end, the appropriate approach depends on exactly what we want to learn, so we should be flexible in our study, using whatever combination of approaches, skills, and units make the most sense. The key issue in the case of choosing both methods and levels of analysis is to maintain some logical consistency. If we are using an approach that combines levels of analysis we should shape the approach so that we are studying comparable units, e.g., nations vs. nations, or one municipality vs. another in the appropriate segment of the project.

### Basic Challenges of Field Research

Since area studies is defined by a geographic, cultural, and historical boundaries, the greatest attraction and challenge for students is to understand the region, by combining study with experience. There are strong limits to what can be accomplished in a classroom, the subtleties of daily experience and interaction with someone from a different cultural world can only be learned in person. On the other hand, intense studying can lead to a much greater appreciation and broader perspective of the experience of a region, well beyond what could be accomplished through simple observation.

This, then, is the challenge for the area studies specialist- not only to find a way to examine a region from an interdisciplinary perspective, but to combine study with experience. Thus, the area studies specialist finds huge obstacles to his/her research in terms of finding the time and funding to travel to the region, and then an appropriate method of engaging with it. Moreover, the area studies specialist can find themselves between two or more different worlds. Given that Latin America is a diverse region of around 500 million people, most students are simply unsatisfied after a few years of study. The contextual differences between their actual experience in the region and that of their own experience which attracted them to the study in the first place often lead them down 2 different paths to get a handle on the level of complexity they encounter. The first is an intense study of a specific problem, such as economic volatility, which they look at across time and space in Latin American history. The second is a specialization within a sub-region- such as the Andes, where they can try to get even closer to the bottom of the rich detail one finds as one gets closer to the phenomena of interest. In effect, like looking at a microscope and discovering another world, once can find a different and equally, if not more, intricately complex world at a local or even personal level of analysis. All of this brings up the question of how the area specialist can transmit the richness and importance of this personal and educational experience to a wider audience, which in the end, is necessary to get the funding to continue one's activity.

This brings up the importance of field research. The challenge of the researcher is to demonstrate the relevance, and, in fact, the necessity of local experience and knowledge to understanding phenomena of wider interest. On the one hand, the argument can be easily made that traveling to Latin America opens up a whole new set of archaeological, archival, documentary, and interview sources of information. But the value of field research goes well beyond this important aspect. Since we are socialized to think, act, and experience life in a certain way, field research can be a quite liberating experience for our own perspective. Spending time with people who have had quite distinct experiences and socialization can help us to see the biases that we have begun to, often unknowingly, inculcate into our own perspective. For example, students often have a messianic salvation complex towards the developing world. Their actual experience in the field can bring to the fore the superficiality and paternalism of such a simplistic approach.

Field research can also, of course, bring the reality of a situation to our consciousness, well beyond any film or talk by a visitor. However, one must be quite careful about reaching conclusions from field research. The experienced researcher finds that each time one visits the same countries, the level of subtlety towards the area or phenomena of study increases. One begins to realize that immediate or strong conclusions reached from an initial trip, were also limited and biased in a number of ways. The bias comes from a number of sources, including the situation of knowledge and experience of the researcher at the time; the particular activity engaged in; the groups and individuals met; the events that the researcher experienced at the time; the way that the subjects of study react to the researcher's presence; and, most importantly, the initial biases towards what the researcher expected to find in the area/phenomena when they planned the trip.

Field research requires intensive planning and a clear scope, objective and methodology. Oftentimes, e-mail, regular mail, and other means of communication are considerably less accessible and reliable in the developing world. In Latin America, in particular, much of the fabric of social interaction occurs through personal networks. Getting access to public officials or interacting in a relatively unbiased way in a local village often takes months of what seems to be unproductive activity in terms of creating relations. Access to basic transport, offices, universities, libraries, and appointment schedules are usually subject to ongoing adjustment. People who seem lost or who look different, especially women, may be subject to some initial harassment and exploitation, as well as what can become at times a tiring curiosity, especially when one wants to blend in to better study an area. People in an area, especially the first time, often feel a kinky enthusiasm for the project. They are initially excited about the newness, subsequently become worn down by the challenge of getting things done, which becomes a form of homesickness, and then, if they stay long enough, can reach a plateau of stability by which time they can take care of most daily needs without a struggle, but in which they have to work a bit harder to keep the novelty factor as a source of energy. Doing some intensive research on lodging, food, etc, from guidebooks and talking to other students who have recently traveled to the same area and studied similar phenomena is vital, but there is only so much one can anticipate. Doing a field school as

an undergraduate where things are already well-organized is a very useful first step. In short, it takes a very adaptable and open-minded personality to succeed and enjoy field research.

However, a strong effort at planning can improve the chances and the productivity of the exercise. It is important, first of all, to clearly define the objectives of the study. Is the study geared towards simply gaining experience, or is it to gather together a certain amount of primary and/or secondary material. Even though haphazard, attempting to precisely locate and contact the people, institutions, and materials one will study can save a lot of effort later. Having a letter of introduction from a principal person, or through another academic from or familiar with the area, can be worth its weight in gold in terms of gaining access to a social network or public ministry. One thing students often overlook in starting field research is that they must clearly define some methodology, not only to clearly define the scope of the study, but to have a framework for interpreting the data on the ground in useful way. Without a clear scope for the project, it may be difficult to move beyond a kind of travelogue experience guide which could be of limited value, especially to other specialists who know the area. Secondly, having a clear scope for the project can help one to stay focused during the initial (and sometimes prolonged) period of dealing with daily obstacles to getting the project going. Moreover, it is important to have some initial conceptual framework that forces one to look at the literature, which can add to the richness of ones interpretation and evaluation of the same phenomena. The goal would be to add to the knowledge that already exists. Thus, having some idea about the methodology for a project can be quite important. Otherwise, a researcher can feel overwhelmed in terms of new information and varying levels of analysis that are difficult to sift through at the time. Having some framework for analysis, in effect, can allow you to create some categories to process information in a way that is helpful for attempting to answer the initial questions of the study. Notwithstanding all of the planning, the research will have to learn be both agile and nimble in terms of contingencies and new ways to look at the subject matter. But the planning can go a long way to alleviating the stress of field research and ensuring a productive outcome.

### Common Errors of Analysis

The most important skills that social science and humanities students take away from their education are critical reading, writing, argumentation, and basic research skills. The main factor determining the level of these skills is the quality, appropriateness, and logic of their analysis. In the end, good research and analysis can only be learned by doing, which is why you must learn in a classroom to receive guidance from an expert. However, becoming aware of common mistakes in analysis can help to speed your learning curve along. Good analysis is what can separate discourse from a schoolyard taunting or an inspiring rant towards a genuinely productive enterprise. A good thumbnail evaluation you should ask yourself is, “is my argument potentially convincing to someone who is neutral or opposed to my point of view.” Here are some examples of common mistakes students make:

*-Approaching the subject matter largely on the basis of emotion and 'otherness.'* We must remain objective; indeed it is paramount to understand all sides of the issues and to challenge ourselves to empathize, particularly with those with whom we have the most disagreement. We will use logic, our growing knowledge base and analytical toolbox to evaluate each "fact," suggestion, and conclusion, regardless of our initial skepticism. Only this attitude will allow us to grow as scholars and individuals and escape the usual cartoonish (black and white, good and bad) approach of many who discuss politics.

*-Weak sources and evidence.* It goes without saying that you are only as good as your evidence. Like a detective, it is up to you to find reliable sources of information that can stand up to the tests of neutral judgment. Unfortunately, there are a growing number of web-based sources that have very little reliability. By reliability, we mean that the sources should be peer-reviewed or have a track record of backing up its public pronouncements. While we should be open to other sources of information as sources of ideas, they will not serve as any foundational source of evidence for our investigation. By being thorough and presenting counter-evidence and counter-arguments, we make our analysis much stronger, precisely because we have anticipated the initial and easy objections to it. This exercise allows us to be more vigilant against our biases that will lead us to skew our conclusions.

*-Inadequate conceptualization.* Unfortunately, the media and even other academics often use terms, such as globalization, without any clear definition. This makes the argument weak, because the reader does not precisely know what the author has in mind. For example, Hannah Arendt, in her book *On Revolution*, pointed out that revolution had a wide variety of meanings depending on the period of time in which it took place. For an untrained mind, using ambiguity seems to allow one to avoid being attacked, but the problem is that one's diagnosis and suggested solution will be equally ambiguous and thus less useful. We should recognize, though, that many political arguments take place on the rhetorical level, imprecision and all.

*-Reaching conclusions without sufficient evidence and confirmation Bias.* Students often start with conclusions and then work backwards to find the evidence. This method usually results in poor argumentation and logic, selective evidence open to challenge, and inability to persuade a reader who does not already agree with the conclusion. Be very cognizant of every assumption you are making so that you can create a very clear and methodical flow of logic. Analysts must also be wary of seeking or organizing the evidence in such a way that it confirms their own, sometimes, subconscious, solutions.

*-Ad hominem attacks and conspiracy theories- creating monsters and angels through fuzzy conceptualization.* Political discourse is often more about showmanship than cold hard discussion, and showmen can be very persuasive in gaming your emotions while making you think that they are being unassailably logical. If anyone tells you that they are 100% certain of something in politics, you should immediately do a gut check to make sure you don't allow the entertainment aspect to drown out your ability to think for yourself.

I find these problems all too common in Latin American studies in terms of pointing the finger at the U.S. as the bogeyman of all problems. Students often become enamored of conspiracy theories which place the CIA at the root of every military coup, for example. The problem with this logic is that it hides some important assumptions. The first is that the CIA is omnipotent and omnipresent. The second is that there are no other sources of Latin American militarism. Both are patently false with even a casual observation of the historical facts. Certainly, U.S. interests are not always looked after, e.g. Fidel Castro in Cuba, which falsifies the first assumption. Secondly, Latin American militaries were a part of Latin American political life even before the U.S. became active in the region in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which shows the second assumption to be false. There are a number of other grounds on which these naïve views could be challenged, yet they seem to have enormous popular and student appeal. While the CIA certainly had a role in Latin America's military development during the Cold War, therefore, we should not buy into these fatalistic perspectives, which, in effect, leave us powerless at the mercy of unseen forces. Perhaps we all prefer to live in a simple and easily understandable world. Unfortunately, students miss the central benefit of a true analysis- in gaining understanding about how U.S. foreign policy really works, we may have our best chance at reducing its often negative effects on the region. We could equally point out the flaws of blaming all Latin America's problems on "neoliberalism" or "globalization." For example, severe inequality existed in Latin America well before neoliberalism and globalization, and by any standard absolute living standards have generally improved throughout the region. More important is to recognize that the linchpin of such weak analysis is that it relies upon fuzzy and emotionally-based concepts. Like US President Reagan called "communism" evil, relying upon the ill-defined and often unclear use of globalization, neoliberalism, and the US are designed to serve as vehicles for an emotional reaction against all the evils of our world. Recognizing the weakness of these approaches would allow us to move beyond the false view of Latin America as a helpless victim. The important thing is to recognize that all individuals (agents) can have some effect on what seem to be intractable structures (long-standing relationships, modes, and practices). Latin American governments, civil societies, and individuals, like their counterparts in our society make choices- they may be constrained, but they are choices. By taking a sense of responsibility, we can find a more optimistic view of the possibilities for change through our own actions.

*-Culture of critique/victimization.* In line with the above, is the tendency not only to look at Latin America, whether we speak of nations, communities, or individuals, as helpless vessels, rather than as agents with constrained choices, but also to focus on an endless laundry list of problems. This can be appealing especially to beginning students as there is a natural biological tendency at a certain age in life to look at the world in dichotomous terms upon recognizing that injustice is rampant in the world. There are a number of professors who cultivate these feelings through fiery speeches, designed to stir up the natural anger students at this stage feel upon finding out how (materially) miserable are the lives of the vast majority of the people in the world. The end result can often be a period of strong activism towards an all-encompassing and quick solution, such as a revolution, followed by a strong disillusionment when changes do not seem forthcoming.

This is unfortunate, because students can lose sight of the very real possibilities for change and agency on the part of Latin Americans. They can also lose the opportunity to seriously examine both new policies and strategies for change that are feasible to various degrees in the short, medium and long-runs. Most importantly, they can lose the possibility to see the world in a balanced perspective, that in the long-run allows them to maintain a longer-term commitment to activism while still taking care of other needs, and, as activists, to seriously consider the merits, problems, and weaknesses of the stances and strategies they employ. The key is not passion, which burns away quickly, but channeled passion, which can be sustained into productive if less dramatic changes. In a sense, ideals can be our destinations, and pragmatism our road map for reaching them, with much flexibility needed in terms of the route to reach our goals.

*-Incoherence in logic or lack of flow.* The best advice for a beginning social scientist is to map out an argument before making it. All too often, analysis is approached in casual or even conversational manner. For social scientists, the transparency and logical flow of an argument is a central feature in its quality. Because we avoid making unwarranted conclusions, it is important to be careful not only to condition our statements, but also to establish a clear flow of logic from one proposition to the next.

*-Focusing on a few events or actors for multiple explanations- taking humans out of the equation* This is a common problem related to fuzzy conceptualizations. Because we as humans are so limited in our natural analytical capability, we must rely upon the written word and mathematics to add complexity to our understanding of the world. Unfortunately, students, perhaps picking up from the usually superficial analysis of journalism and activism, which may well have sparked their interest in the topic, place too much weight into one of two extremes. The first is to view the world as a vast “system,” often using such concepts as “capitalism” to capture all the problems of humanity across time and space. While there are certainly problems with capitalism, pre-capitalist societies also suffered from violence, inequalities, and a host of other recurring problems. Similarly, under capitalism, there has been progress in terms of human slavery, gender rights, and living standards. So, this suggests the need for a much more nuanced view of the world. The other extreme is to focus on just one actor or event, such as Fidel Castro or the terrorist attack on the US on Sept. 11, 2002, as changing every subsequent policy. Even Fidel Castro must work in a world of constraints, and even Fidel will one day pass from the scene. Though Sept. 11 (like Fidel) did have a major emotional political affect on US foreign policy, terrorist incidents upon US targets predated the attack, such as the embassy bombings in Africa. In short, to really get at the problem of terrorism, we would want to understand deeper roots of discontent with US foreign policy, among other things, in the long course of Middle Eastern history.

*-Recognizing the limits of our knowledge vs. the thirst for a Simple View of the World.* Students often get the mistaken impression that statements in texts or by professors are definitive. If that was the case, most of us as professors would be quite bored by now! The truth is that the thing that excites most of us as experts in a field is the boundless limits to the learning process. We may accumulate knowledge, but there is always another topic to learn. Students must keep in mind that, when they are examining a text,

it is simply an author's argument. The merits must be checked through an evaluation of the logic, flow, and evidence. For a question such as ways to improve economic development, there simply is no definitive answer, as we shall see in our chapter on the subject. Recognizing that we will never arrive at a clear and simple answer for complex problems can be disconcerting at first, but that is part of what makes the enterprise of social science most interesting. To top it all off, even where an answer seems to explain phenomena well, it may not fit the changing circumstances of the future! Once your analytical skills are well-developed, you will find that the most interesting thing of all is that there can be multiple plausible explanations for the same phenomena, the question then becomes evaluating which is the most persuasive.

*-Making recommendations on the basis of infinite resources, including time, and ignoring opportunity costs.* Once the in-exhaustive search for the truth is temporarily quenched, the student often turns to "what, then, is to be done," as Lenin put it. It is in the crucial exercise of making recommendations that a scholar and policy analyst finds out if the analysis is truly sound. The strength of the diagnosis is directly related to the possibilities for a cure, rather than simply treating the symptoms. In the end, this is the golden prize which we are all after- how to make an impact upon the world to make it a better place. Therefore, we must be relentlessly scrutinizing, critical, and open-minded about solutions that are offered. We must be ready to adopt them to different situations, personalities, and interests. We must recognize above all that we live in a world of scarce resources, including limited time. Every solution, then, involves trade-offs. If we put resources and time in one area, it will take away from others. When we solve one problem, even if it seems to be a "no brainer," such as saving the environment or creating a revolution for the poor, the costs of reaching there, and the situation afterwards are obscure to us. Despite all these myriad problems, we should never lose sight on the prize- recommendations, however contingent are always needed for action to occur in an intelligent fashion. If we are not trying to make realistic recommendations, what are we accomplishing, other than ego gratification?

### Research Methods for Area Studies

It is important for student to not only follow the news and broaden their knowledge base of Latin America, but to move beyond to developing basic research skills that will help them to begin moving towards developing their own analyses. Below you will find a basic list of some of the skills you can begin to develop in your various Latin American courses. These should be followed up by a course in methodology and consultation of specialized texts.

-archaeological- These skills involve uncovering the past, including physically, to understand past ways of living. Understanding previous ways of life can add a great deal of insight not only into the roots of our own behavior, but also a fresh perspective on how things have and can change.

-archival- This would be similar to archaeological, but it is focused on examination of primary documents. For example, if we wanted to understand the thinking behind the

Monroe Doctrine which provided the initial justification for U.S. involvement in the region, we would be well-served to examine Monroe's correspondence and own thoughts at the time, as well as those of his colleagues.

-secondary- Secondary research is the usual first step for any university research paper. Good secondary research, however, involves much more than simply finding a few relevant sources. To really understand what is known and speculated about a subject, an exhaustive search should be performed, using books, article indices, and web searches, though web sources should be highly reliable ones. This means one should choose a subject that is appropriate in scope for the time and length of the research, or acknowledge the limits of the conclusions reached.

-interviews- Interviews are certainly one of the cornerstones of areas studies research. Conducting interviews is both a skill and an art, and improves with practice. You should be very careful to be clear about what you want to obtain from the interview to ensure that the information will be well-used. Interviews are particularly helpful where key individuals had a role in the behaviour you are studying. Interviews can often reveal unexpected insights. A related but more involved method from anthropology is called participant-observation, whereby the researcher actually lives with the community he/she is studying for a time.

-comparative- The comparative method involves comparing units or phenomena along two possible lines, which could be combined. Because social circumstances are constantly changing into unique forms, we can not administer controlled experiments. The first line of comparison is the before-and-after circumstances of an interesting event or change. The second line of comparison would be to compare characteristics across units. By comparing similarities or differences, we can attempt to find out if some possible causes could be explained through the patterns we find.

-statistical- Most statistical analysis is done on the basis of data compiled by others, such as basic economic data. However, a particularly interesting source of new information is to conduct your own surveys. Surveys can be particularly helpful in monitoring changes in beliefs, attitudes, and opinions.

-deconstructive- Postmodern theories and writings have demonstrated that inquiring into the way that a conversation, or discourse, is framed, can have profound effects on both the content and ultimate conclusions of the discourse. For example, in Latin America, there is often a widespread assumption on both the left and the right that progress means a "modern" economy is an advanced industrialized one. Postmodernist writers, such as Arturo Escobar, challenge the idea that there is a single definition for development that can be shared. Using semiotics, or the study of signs and cultural symbols, as well as deconstruction, we can begin to expose the underlying assumptions and definitions that we take for granted. This makes us much better scholars in that we are better able to take a more open-minded view of the world and attempt to resist our own value biases and quick judgments.

In the end, social science is about supposition, tentative conclusions, and plausibility. Yet, if we recognize that we live partly in a world of ideas, we find that we have the potential to affect not only through understanding why we behave the way we do, but also the way that we understand ourselves. Combining good analytical and research skills and experience is a promising way to get closer to the truth and to move towards alleviating or solving public policy problems.

## Suggested Exercises

Key terms: area studies; deductive vs inductive; levels of analysis; field research; ad hominem; (confirmation) bias; reliability and validity of evidence; victimization; incoherence; reductionism

Discussion Questions: What are the benefits of area studies vs. a disciplinary focus? Should we be focusing on particular regions in this era of globalization? Why do we tend to look at developing countries in a patronizing way, as a helpless victim? What does that say about us? How does it affect our ability to change? How can we balance our desire to affect change with the desire to know the truth?

The instructor can take an event that is reported on in the news from a variety of different angles. He can then ask students to give their own interpretation of the event, and then explain how and why the other perspectives differ on the same event. Especially helpful is taking the same event as reported from actors opposed to one another, as well as contrasting Latin American with North American and European sources. Another interesting exercise to contrast the viewpoints of 2 contemporary writers from a previous era on a recurring problem in Latin America, such as inequality. It helps students to read the primary materials from Latin America to understand that the region has struggled with its problems in a pro-active manner.

Obviously, to understand different disciplinary perspectives and methodology requires time working through those disciplines. However, instructors can provide short articles from the different disciplines and then contrast the substantive and methodological approaches. In terms of methodology, providing some basic exercises such as having students retrieve and then analyze statistical data, or providing biographical research on an author to better understand his/her perspective can be very helpful in giving students practice in practical research, and, more importantly, in showing how complementary disciplines and methods can be in practice.

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