SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

SOCIOLOGY IN ACTION

KRISTIN KENNEAVY
CATHERINE E. HARNOIS

SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

SOCIOLOGY IN ACTION

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SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

SOCIOLOGY IN ACTION

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PREFACE

Welcome to *Social Research Methods: Sociology in Action*. We are proud to be part of the *Sociology in Action* family of texts and hope that you will enjoy using this book as much as we enjoyed creating it. Having taught research methods classes ourselves, we understand how crucial it is for students not just to read the textbook, but to engage with the material in a hands-on and creative way so that they can expand their knowledge and develop their burgeoning skills. As we collaborated in creating this text, we felt confident that a book that included such opportunities would be well-received. Hands-on learning is especially important in a social research course, as there is no substitute for actually doing the tasks that build to a completed research project.

Social Research Methods: Sociology in Action includes the tools and techniques that will allow instructors to put together an active learning course that promotes student learning, retention, and engagement. Without the right tools, incorporating active learning into the curriculum can be onerous and time-consuming. This text eases the burden for instructors by incorporating numerous dynamic activities that allow students to more fully interact with and comprehend the material. Instructors in all course sizes, those teaching online and those teaching in-person, will be able to use and adapt these activities to fit the specifications of their classroom experiences. The exercises include creative, hands-on, data analytic, and community learning activities.

The contributors to this text are avid users of active learning techniques themselves, and their expertise shines through. Each chapter features social research content, discussion questions, active learning exercises, and real-world profiles of Sociologists in Action. These profiles showcase the varied types of research and career positions that sociologists pursue and help students to envision their own sociological journeys. Together, we have created a book that requires students to do sociology as they learn it and creates a bridge between the classroom and the larger social world.

Organization and Features

The clear organizational style of each chapter helps students follow the logic of the text and concentrate on the main ideas presented. Each chapter opens with focal learning questions, and each major section ends with review questions to remind students of the emphasis in the presented material. The chapters contain definitions of key concepts and approaches, descriptions of the broad and varied approaches sociologists take to their research, as well as copious examples. Chapters close with a conclusion, and end-of-chapter resources include a list of key terms and a summary that addresses the focal learning questions. The active learning activities and Consider This marginal questions throughout each chapter help create a student-centered class that engages student interest.

The book's rich pedagogy supports active learning and engagement throughout each chapter.

- Learning Questions start off every chapter, introducing students to the focus of the chapter and preparing them for the material it covers. These questions are tied to the learning objectives provided in the instructor resources. Each learning question addresses a main section of the chapter.
- Check Your Understanding questions appear at the end of every major section in a chapter, providing students with an opportunity to pause in their reading and ensure that they comprehend and retain what they've just read.
- Doing Sociology activities appear multiple times in each chapter. These active learning exercises enable students to apply the sociological concepts, and methods covered in the text. Each chapter contains a variety of exercises so that instructors can use them in class, online, or as assignments conducted outside of class.

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- Consider This questions are designed to spark deep thinking as well as classroom discussions.
- Sociologists in Action boxes feature a student or professional "sociologist in action" doing public sociology related to the material covered in the chapter. This feature provides examples of how sociology can be used to make a positive impact on society.
- Key Terms appear in bold where they are substantially discussed for the first time and are compiled in a list with page numbers at the end of their respective chapters. Corresponding definitions can be found in the Glossary.
- Every chapter concludes with a Chapter Summary that restates the learning questions presented at the start of the chapter and provides answers to them. This provides an important way for students to refresh their understanding of the material and retain what they've learned.

In addition, as appropriate, chapters include information on careers that relate to the chapter content. This allows students to recognize, even during their first sociology course, the wide variety of career options a sociology degree provides.

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We would like to acknowledge the many people who worked with us on *Social Research Methods: Sociology in Action*. Our thanks, first and foremost, go to the contributors who wrote the chapters and helped us to create an active learning introductory sociology course in one text. Their exceptional ability to use active learning in the classroom has impressed and inspired us. We appreciate their willingness to share what they do so well and to collaborate with us on *Social Research Methods: Sociology in Action*.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to Maxine Atkinson and Kathleen Korgen, the editors of the original *Sociology in Action* text, and the editors for the series. Their commitment to and knowledge of engaged learning, and to the discipline of sociology, are at the core of this text. Our thanks also go to the wonderful people at SAGE for their tremendous work on this project. Acquisitions editor Jeff Lasser believed in the need for this text, brought us together, and is the chief reason why this book (and the entire *Sociology in Action* series) became a reality. Tara Slagle, our content development editor, provided her great expertise in helping us to shape this book, and supported us through its production (and through a pandemic). Rebecca Lee engineered the transformation of the manuscript into real book pages.

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Social Problems, Journal of Criminal Justice, Social Science Research, Sociological Spectrum, Great Plains Research, Sociology Compass, and *Sociation Today*.

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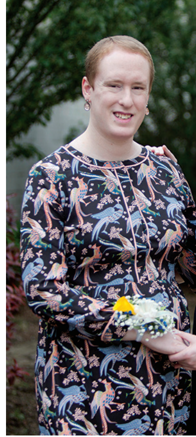

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1 MAKING THE CASE FOR SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Kristin Kenneavy

STUDENT LEARNING QUESTIONS

1.1 What is sociology? What is social science?

1.2 How do sociological research and the scientific method help us to overcome everyday misperceptions?

1.3 What are ways in which social science research is valuable as a life skill?

1.4 How does social science research benefit society?

HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

Kristin Kenneavy

I grew up in a very small town in northeastern Wisconsin. When I was in high school, my English teacher assigned us a research paper. We had to go to the school library and find news articles, books, and other types of primary sources about a topic. I chose women's rights. I don't know why I picked that topic, but it turned out that I really enjoyed learning about it. At that time, in the early 1990s, the modern Women's Movement had been active for decades, and during the 1980s, had already survived what Susan Faludi (1991) had called *Backlash*. Her book, subtitled *The Undeclared War Against American Women,* was about this phenomenon and one of the sources I utilized for the paper I had to write. I subsequently went to college at the University of Oklahoma, and there I continued to explore the topic of women's rights when I took a course called "Sociology of Gender." It was one of the most fascinating classes I had ever taken, and so I decided to declare a minor in sociology. I was already learning a lot about differences in male and female patterns of speech in my major, which was communication. Through graduate school and beyond, most of my work has had a theme of gender running through it. I have studied how gender role attitudes affect whether Americans support civil liberties for gays and lesbians; how media consumption affects gendered dating attitudes among adolescents; and, most recently, how men and women differ in their approaches to acting as active bystanders to prevent interpersonal violence. Hopefully you will find some aspect of sociology that you love, and will continue to learn about it for years to come!

Have you ever wandered around a public place, like a mall or an airport, and spent time people-watching? Perhaps you noticed people of two different ages sitting together and wondered why. Are they a parent and adult child? Are they coworkers? Maybe they are in a cross-generational friendship or romance. You might consider clues that could lead you to favor one of those conclusions over another. How close together are they seated? Are they holding hands? Do they have laptops out in front of them? Most likely you find the process of people-watching to be sort of fun; after all, you get to make observations, and

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craft a little story (let's call it a hypothesis) about what you think is happening. If you watch further, you may even be able to gather some evidence that supports your interpretation of the relationship.

If you have engaged in people-watching, then you are already acting like a sociologist who is doing a research project. Although the process of doing research can be complex, and at times even intimidating, try to remember this example. Without even trying, you already know how to do many of the types of techniques on which sociologists rely when they engage in social science research. The big difference is that sociologists do research systematically and scientifically. What does this mean? Let's find out.

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Before we go further into the chapter, it is important to define some key terms, like sociology and social science. In a nutshell, sociology is one type of science that falls under the umbrella of a group of related sciences that are collectively known as "social science." The next sections will go into more detail about the similarities and differences between these two terms.

What Is Sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how society shapes individual people and groups, as well as how individual people and groups shape society (Korgen & Atkinson, 2019). Consider the example of Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager who, at age 15, spearheaded a movement of young people to protest global warming. She began by standing outside of Swedish parliament and eventually organized a school climate strike called *Fridays for Future* that became a worldwide phenomenon.

What are some of the ways in which society has shaped Greta's activism? First, she is a young person living in an era whenj threats to the world environment are considered a very serious issue. As a result, Greta became aware of such environmental problems at a relatively early age. Second, she lives in a democratic nation in which her freedom of speech is protected. In some parts of the world, Greta would not have been able to stage a strike among her fellow students to skip school to protest climate change without serious repercussions or even threats of violence. Finally, Greta lives in a modern era when it is relatively easy to communicate information and spread ideas. As a result, other people in Sweden and around the world joined her in her efforts to bring the dangers of climate change to the attention of world leaders. Without these circumstances, her story would have been very different.

The technological and political landscape, Swedish history and culture, as well as the changing climate all play a role in shaping Greta's life, but Greta has also shaped many aspects of society. She started out as a single young girl with a sign, but caught the public's attention through her determination and persistence. She is now the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her work related to challenging inaction regarding global warming and other environmental concerns. She has addressed the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, and her speeches have been widely covered in news media reports. By thinking about Greta Thunberg, her global influence, as well as the circumstances that led her to call attention to climate change, and the factors that contributed to her successes, we can begin to understand the complex relationship between individuals and society. Greta's case represents just one example, however. And we don't need to focus on world-famous people in order to examine the interplay of individuals and society. In fact, sociologists research all sorts of people, doing all sorts of things, in all sorts of contexts, in order to understand the relationship between individuals and society (Mills, 1959).

Greta Thunberg has been instrumental in bringing more attention to the issue of climate change in recent years. She is seen here alongside President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen at a meeting of the European Union Commission on March 4, 2020.

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What Is Social Science?

Sociology is part of a larger body of theory, knowledge, and research techniques know as social science. Before we can discuss social science, it is probably a good idea to identify some of the characteristics of science more generally. Science is an approach to knowledge generation that focuses on collecting data—or observations—using our senses, from the world around us. Scientists use theoretical explanations about such observations as a way to make sense of possible patterns in data. Those patterns can lead scientists to generate **hypotheses**, or testable statements that make predictions about how the world works. Those hypotheses are then tested using more observations, and the cycle begins again. Social science functions in this manner, but instead of making observations about fish, or volcanoes, or diseases, social scientists observe social life.

All social sciences examine aspects of social life, but they do so in different ways. They also tend to ask different types of questions. The social sciences include anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and social geography, to name a few.

You might ask yourself, what do these fields have in common, and how do they differ? One helpful contrast is to think about sociology is different from fields like psychology, political science, or economics. Most likely, a psychologist would approach the issue of a climate change a bit differently from how a sociologist would approach it. Psychologists tend to focus more on individual people and less on the broader society. A psychologist might want to know how people assess the risks associated with climate change or how people think about issues such as recycling. How do attitudes about recycling relate to the identities people hold and ultimately to their behavior? Sociologists who study climate change tend to research it as a general pattern, or social phenomenon. As a result, they may be more likely to examine broad trends in beliefs about science and climate change. They might analyze rates of recycling, how they differ across age groups, municipal areas, or national contexts, and how they may have changed over time, perhaps with respect to historical shifts in a particular society. Political scientists might focus on how flooding due to climate change could be an issue in state elections, and might suggest policy solutions that would address how to coordinate efforts to address an issue like farm waste pollution. Economists might attempt to estimate the costs associated with reducing carbon footprints by consumers cutting down on meals that include meat. Although these examples show that various social sciences have different emphases, the point to remember is that they are all grounded in scientific discovery, about which there will be more discussion in the next section.

CONSIDER THIS...

We often see psychologists portrayed in popular media. Sociologists are less often featured in the media. How would you explain the difference between psychology and sociology to a friend or roommate?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.1

Applying Social Science Research

In this activity, you will consider the role of research in making important life decisions.

Think about some of the big decisions you've made in the past, such as your decision to apply to college and your decision about which college to attend. With this in mind, write answers to the following questions:

1. What types of resources did you consult when applying for college?
2. What types of criteria did you consider?
3. How did consulting data help you with your college selection process?

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Think about some of the big choices that you may need to make in the future, such as selecting a graduate school, a company or organization for which to work, a town in which to live, or how to invest for retirement.

1. How might knowledge of how to find and assess quality research be helpful in one of these decisions?

Check Your Understanding

1. How does Greta Thunberg's story illustrate how sociologists think about the world?
2. How is sociology similar to, and different from, other social sciences?

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Why should we do social science research? Taking a casual, people-watching approach is a great start, but social scientists are generally trying to arrive at some sort of objective "truth." Truth? If you are already thinking, "What is truth?," Whose truth?," and "How do we decide how to arrive at the truth?," then congratulations—you are thinking critically! Luckily, curious, critical thinkers like yourself have been wrestling with these questions for thousands of years. The way in which social scientists approach generating truthful knowledge is by using the scientific method. The scientific method is most often associated with the natural sciences (like chemistry or physics), so you might be surprised to learn that sociologists use it too. We will get into the specifics of the scientific method in just a bit, but first, let's explore why we need help to arrive at the "truth."

Our Tricky Human Brains

Imagine if you had to figure out what you should do when you walk into your classroom afresh every day. You'd walk to the door. Should you knock on it or just go in? Should you say "hi" to everyone as you enter? Should you take a seat, or maybe stand at the front of the room? Should you do some much-needed stretches or take out your textbook? Luckily, you don't have to figure this out every day because you have some previous experience with how to enter a classroom. If you had to re-learn this process every time you came to class, your brain would be too worn out to learn anything new.

Humans live in a complex world. We are surrounded by sensory stimuli at all times. As a result, our brains have adapted by creating some shortcuts so that we can do more than just react to the world around us. There are four primary shortcuts that can lead to erroneous conclusions about social life (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization happens when you rely on a few of your own experiences to make broad claims about other situations or other groups. As an example, perhaps you have witnessed aggravating and unsafe behaviors by people who are in their teens. You may begin to think that *all* teens are prone to misbehavior and are generally out to cause trouble. This process is not dissimilar from what we sometimes call stereotyping, or painting a group of people with a description that may not actually apply to everyone within that group. We need to be careful not to apply our limited knowledge to a group of people or observations with which we are unfamiliar because, when we do so, it limits our ability to correctly perceive what is taking place.

Selective or Inaccurate Perception

Selective perception is when we pay attention to those things, people, and experiences with which we are most familiar or that align with things that we already believe to be true. Let's return to the example of teens misbehaving. You have already made an overgeneralization that "all teens are out to cause trouble." How likely are you, then, to notice every time you see a teen behaving badly? Probably more so than you are to notice if adults, elders, or children are behaving badly, right? Part of this process

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is failing to notice disconfirming evidence (that is, evidence that challenges what you believe). For instance, do you happen to notice all those teens who are well-behaved and maybe even helpful to others? Probably not. Our brains don't necessarily do this on purpose, but when we only pay attention to certain people, behaviors, or items, we run the risk of misperceiving the world around us by only attending to those observations to which we have become accustomed.

CONSIDER THIS...

Think about a time when you purchased something new, like a sweet pair of headphones, or maybe your first car. Did it suddenly seem as if that product was everywhere you looked? How might our attention to what is familiar lead us to inaccurate observations about patterns of social behavior?

Illogical Reasoning

When we reason illogically, it means that we have come to conclusions based on a misinterpretation of the evidence at hand, usually because of faulty assumptions about that evidence. You may be aware of a recent group of vocal advocates called "Flat Earthers." Members of this group assume that, since they cannot see the curvature of the Earth from their vantage point, the planet is actually flat. Most of us would agree that the Earth is round (or vaguely egg-shaped) because we assume that the photos taken of it from outer space are a representation of a three-dimensional object. When we utilize incorrect assumptions in trying to explain the social life that we experience every day, this could lead us to incorrect conclusions. To continue our example from above, since you already think that teens are the worst, you may conclude that parents and high schools are doing a poor job of socializing and educating teens. However, you would be making an erroneous assumption because you have conflated the assumed characteristics of teenagers with the assumed characteristics of the institutions that mold them.

Resistance to Change

No one likes to admit they are wrong. But if we never consider new ideas or new information, then we will never learn anything! Imagine you were confronted with some statistics that indicate that most teens actually display behaviors that are very pro-social and positive. Would you want to change your mind about your conclusion that all teenagers are terrible? It is likely that you may actually grumble about this finding because it doesn't square very well with what you believe about teens in general.

In everyday life, we can also overrely on some types of information. For instance, you might fully support a particular politician, but it may not be such a great idea to take everything they say as completely accurate or factual. Similarly, many people rely on information from journalists, religious figures, or even role models, like parents or celebrities, as "truth." When we rely too heavily on authority figures, we may be misled if *their* own conclusions are incorrect. Finally, another type of information that can lead us astray is "common sense." Common sense is not always accurate, though we often take it for granted as fact. It's worth remembering that what is common sense to one person may be utter nonsense to another, so it is an unreliable source of knowledge.

As part of the Fridays for Future movement started by Greta Thunberg, thousands of students staged a protest in Leeds, UK, on November 29, 2019.

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Given that these four types of commonplace misperceptions are quite likely to trip us up as we try to arrive at "the truth," then what steps can we take to try to overcome these problems? Let's return to the idea of the scientific method to help us make accurate claims about social life.

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The Scientific Method

We know that our human brains are easily led astray when we make only casual observations about social life. Luckily, the **scientific method** uses a relatively strict set of steps that can help us to sort fact from fiction. It generally suggests that you first start with a research problem or a research question (What is going on with that mixed-age couple?). You then propose some sort of explanation of why the phenomenon is happening in the way it is (I think they are coworkers), and then you gather data to test whether your explanation was correct (Oops. Now they are holding hands and kissing—probably not coworkers). So, the scientific method works a lot like people-watching except that it demands that observations are empirical and systematic. Let's unpack those terms.

The scientific method demands that we collect **empirical data**, which means that the information can be observed using our human senses. By taking an empirical approach, we cease to rely on previously held beliefs, the authority of others, or common sense. We are being very deliberate about the type of evidence we are going to consider. We basically aren't going to take anyone's word for it that something is true. Rather, we may need others to review our work and verify that our conclusions are correct.

Furthermore, the data must be gathered in a *systematic* fashion. To gather data systematically means that you have to make a plan for how you are going to collect data and let that plan dictate which observations are included and which are left out. In **systematic data collection**, we avoid overgeneralization. Rather than misapplying potentially wrong conclusions based on a handful of observations, we will select observations in a way that will represent a larger population.

Social science should also, ideally, be **replicable**. By being very explicit and transparent about the way in which we went about gathering the data for a study, other social scientists should be able to redo our study and get the same, or similar results. In real life, it isn't particularly common for a study to be replicated (and some really can't be replicated because they are completed in a specific time and place). However, if another researcher were to try to repeat your study faithfully, and if they got completely different results, then researchers would have to consider why the differences emerged. In fact, social science studies often find dissimilar results; these differences force researchers to consider their theories, methods, and findings more critically in order to account for the discrepancies.

Something important to remember is that no *one* social science study is going to be able to establish "the truth" on its own. Rather, we have to think of empirical research as part of an ongoing conversation in which many people are trying to establish truth collectively. This brings up some terms that you should know. When we think that we can see the world as it is, without bringing to our conclusions all our personal experiences, misperceptions, and prior knowledge, we are claiming that we can be **objective**. As you may have guessed, it is almost impossible for any human to be entirely objective because *each of our perspectives is influenced to some extent by our own personal experiences, values, misperceptions, and knowledge.* These can't help but affect the types of problems we choose to study, the ways in which we choose to study them, and how we interpret the data we examine.

If we think of social science research as being part of a larger enterprise that is trying to approximate the truth from multiple perspectives, then we do not have to try to reach objectivity. Instead, we can hope to achieve what is called **intersubjectivity**. Intersubjectivity happens when multiple researchers look at aspects of a research problem, and over time and in collaboration, try to establish some sort of scientific agreement as to what is actually happening with respect to a particular pattern in social life. This may not sound as convincing as having a purely objective stance, but it is certainly much more realistic, and possibly more helpful.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.2

Misperceptions and the Media

In this activity, you will apply common misperceptions to critically analyze an example from the media.

We often come across research that is presented via news media. Let's say that you come across a news report that states that eating chocolate will help you lose weight. Write four questions you would want to ask about the report. Use the four types of common misperceptions, and your knowledge of the scientific method, to guide your response.

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Check Your Understanding

1. What are four types of thinking that can cloud our ability to correctly perceive social life?
2. What are the benefits of using the scientific method when doing research?
3. What does it mean for research to be empirical, systematic, and replicable?
4. What is the difference between objectivity and intersubjectivity?

SOCIAL RESEARCH AS A LIFE SKILL

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "Sociology and social science research sound sort of interesting, but what's in it for me? What am I going to get out of this experience?" Well, there is a reason why pretty much every sociology program in the United States requires a research class. Learning about how to do social science research offers you an opportunity to develop many different skills. The next section will feature four good reasons why learning this material is useful, as opposed to just interesting.

Making Real-World Decisions

The world around us can be overwhelming. We live in a complex social world that is becoming more globally connected every minute. In the midst of this, we still have to try to make sound life choices. How will understanding social research help with this? Well, one of the critical mindsets that you will develop through this course is healthy skepticism, which will allow you to synthesize information and evaluate competing claims. Think back to Doing Sociology 1.1 earlier in this chapter. You were asked to think about the types of information that you utilized to make decisions about where you would go to college. If you said that you consulted websites that compared colleges and universities based on numerous criteria, then you were utilizing social science research.

A key goal of descriptive social science research is to provide you with facts about a particular entity or phenomenon. What you may not have known is that colleges and universities are often the providers of information to clearinghouse websites. You may now be thinking, "Hey, wait a minute. If the colleges provided those data, then wouldn't they want to give the website numbers that portray them in the best possible light?" Great job—you are using healthy skepticism to inform that question. Yes. Colleges and universities want to recruit as many bright, prepared students as they can in order to collect tuition and enhance their prestige (giving them the ability to recruit even more bright, prepared students in the future). Thankfully, the vast majority of colleges and universities don't just make up their outcomes on the criteria that are of interest to prospective students and their families. Instead, there is usually a unit within the college that is tasked with gathering the types of data for which such websites and review magazines are looking. The people working in what are called institutional research offices are trained professionals who often have degrees in—you guessed it—social science research. They may do research on the proportion of graduates who have a job within 6 months of graduating. They may also need to gather information on the types of majors that are available, whether or not there is an active alumni network, and how many students graduate within 4 years of enrolling. These are all important considerations to which students might attend when deciding where to go to college.

Similarly, there will be many instances in which you will need to make informed decisions based on the available research. Your job in this course over the next few months is to become equipped to evaluate the quality of that research. You should start to develop the habit of asking questions like, "Who gathered these data? Are they trained to do it in an ethical and systematic fashion? Who decided that these are important criteria? Have they left out any other criteria that may have been important to my decision? How have these data been reported? Is everyone's information included, or have some folks' outcomes been left out so that the numbers look better than they really are?" These types of questions reveal critical thinking skills that will be strengthened by learning about the research process. You can apply them to decisions like choosing a financial adviser, selecting a town in which to buy a home, or evaluating the quality of elementary schools within that town—all important adult life decisions.

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Being an active user of social media requires media literacy.
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Media Literacy

Media are rife with information, and claims about social life abound. You have probably seen thousands of claims like the following: "This toothpaste will freshen your breath *and* whiten your teeth! It's been scientifically proven!" Even just watching depictions of life on popular television shows can lead you to believe that they represent some sort of social reality. The media, be they news or entertainment-based, convey information about social life. However, much of what is presented can be distorted or exaggerated. Having the ability to sort fact from fiction in news accounts, advertisements, and fictional portrayals is called being **media literate**.

Let's think through an example. Imagine that you regularly get your news from social media feeds such as Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. You may follow some sources, but you also click through the news stories that your friends post. As a social scientist, you may ask yourself, "Am I really getting balanced news if I primarily rely on my friends to provide me with links?" Chances are, you are probably not going to get a broad cross-section of news that way.

Knowledge of research methods enables you to understand that your friends are not a random sample of the population. In fact, since they are your friends, it is entirely likely that they have many similarities to you. They may come from the same town, they may be more likely to be of the same political orientation, and they may likely also be of the same age or racial/ethnic group. If this is the case, then you might be consuming news media that are only relevant to what your friends think is interesting or important. If you were inclined to have a more broad-based view of what is happening in the world, you may need to do some research. For instance, you might want to find out how news sources have been measured on a political spectrum, and how they are ranked with respect to providing facts versus presenting an agenda or possibly even misleading information. Being able to ask questions about media presentations, and to find your own news, is facilitated by having a good working knowledge of how to evaluate sources for quality.

Citizenship

Learning about social science research can also give you insight into the types of laws, policies, and programs that govern much of our social life. There is a tremendous amount of disagreement in the United States, currently, around a wide variety of social policies. How can research help us to make sense of the many political claims that are so prevalent?

Let's think through an example. A **referendum** is a vote by citizens in a specific area (like a town, or a whole state) about a single political question. Let's say that there is a referendum in your town about whether or not to build a new community center. Those in favor of the community center claim that it will provide a space for kids, teens, and older adults to utilize for educational and entertainment events. They point to the lack of such a space currently, and argue that the proposed center will foster a deeper sense of community in the town and can also function as a way for key groups to find out about social services and opportunities for involvement in the area. Those opposed to the idea state that the increased tax revenue needed to build, maintain, and staff the facility is greater than the proposed benefits. They also assert that the increased traffic to that part of town is a potential problem and may result in hidden costs, like having to re-time some of the traffic lights. How are you, as a citizen, going to make up your mind about whether the benefits of the community center outweigh the costs?

As someone who knows about social science research, you could start looking into how the pro–community center group came up with their estimates of how many people will use the center. Do their assumptions make logical sense? Have they included a plan for how they will advertise the events that take place in the space? Did they conduct any surveys of residents of the town to see if

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they would have an interest in using the center in some way? How are the costs and benefits associated with the proposed community center distributed across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups? All of these issues can be answered if you are able to anticipate and consume research-based information.

In addition, you may want to examine the types of evidence being presented by those opposed to the plan. Have they conducted a traffic study that indicates that there actually would be more cars driving in that particular part of town? What about the increased tax revenue? You would want to examine whether the proposed costs for the project seem to outstrip whatever funds the town has put aside for the project, any anticipated revenues for the center that would balance the costs, and any fund-raising or sponsorship by local businesses that may be planned. Citizens are often faced with complicated choices. Being able to sort through various types of research and ask smart questions about assumptions is a key skill needed by an informed citizen.

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

Erin J. Augis

I study ways people engage religious beliefs and practices to effect self-determined actions for social change. For many years, I studied how contemporary West African Muslim women worked for improved living conditions and independence from older generations' norms through conservative, reformist Sunni organizations. Currently, I continue to pursue my curiosity about ways devout people have worked for progress in my new research program on the history of American Protestants who lived in southern Ohio (along the Ohio River) and worked for the abolition of slavery during the 1830s and 40s. Abolition was the first widespread human rights movement in the United States, and Protestants who participated tended to be conservative in religious beliefs and social practices (opposing the consumption of alcohol and emphasizing the importance of theological studies), but they were rigorously progressive in their advocacy for the freedom of enslaved peoples.

Inspired by the research of Ann Hagedorn, author of *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), I focus my studies on the Reverend John Bennington Mahan of Ohio, who died opposing slavery in 1844. *Beyond the River* centers on the abolitionist river town of Ripley, Ohio, and the life of Reverend John Rankin, one of the most active abolitionists in the U.S. leading up to the Civil War. Reverend Mahan was Rankin's close associate, and he aided hundreds of enslaved people in their escapes, also traveling regularly to preach against America's peculiar institution. He went to trial twice and was imprisoned once because he was accused of "stealing" enslaved peoples and disrupting the peace. Although he was acquitted, he became ill in jail and died of tuberculosis that he had likely contracted there. At his arrest, he was denied a writ of *habeus corpus* by the lawyer Thomas Hamer, who was an anti-abolitionist. While today Hamer is nationally lauded as a hero of the Mexican War, Reverend Mahan is largely unknown.

Reverend Mahan's gravestone is small but historically momentous. Although he and his family were bankrupted by the legal costs for his defense, they remained defiant even in his death. His epitaph reads, "Victim of the slave power." "The slave power" was the abolitionists' derisive term for politicians and elite plantation owners who benefited from and defended the predominance of slavery in the American economy. I am working with the National Park Service and local residents to protect Reverend Mahan's grave, and collaborate with area librarians, archivists, and Reverend Mahan's great-great-great-granddaughter to identify and safeguard the written antislavery sermons, letters, legal depositions, and accounts records that he left behind, which are in various locations in Ohio and Kentucky. I am not only writing sociological analyses of Reverend Mahan's religious and social activism; I am working to preserve the physical artifacts of his human rights legacy for future generations to appreciate.

Erin J. Augis is a professor of sociology at Ramapo College of New Jersey, where she specializes in the sociology of religion.

Discussion Questions

1. What methods of data collection do you think Professor Augis uses to uncover sociological insight into Protestant abolitionists?
2. In what ways has Professor Augis made her academic work public?

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Working in a Career

Finally, one of the key reasons why you are probably reading this book at all is that you are in college, in the hopes of eventually graduating and finding employment, or even opening your own business. You may not know yet what you want to do when you graduate, or maybe you do have an idea and you don't think that it will involve having to do your own research. Perhaps it won't. However, in many types of jobs that sociology students enter, even if you don't end up conducting research, odds are that you will be the *consumer* or *communicator* of some types of research. In addition, being able to indicate on a résumé that you have had some coursework in how to do research may actually help you to land a job in the first place.

Many professions rely upon social research, and students with degrees in sociology go on to work in a wide variety of fields. For instance, police officers may not be at the top of your list in terms of professions that use research, but all police departments actually do gather data. Officers need to keep track of the number of incidents to which they are called, whether there was an arrest, and what type of offense was committed. These statistics are compiled and reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). In turn, this program publishes research reports that keep track of crime trends for the entire United States. Knowledge of crime trends is then utilized by police chiefs to make decisions about the types of training that police officers need and how to deploy their departments' resources.

CONSIDER THIS...

Take a minute to think about a job that you would really love to do, without worrying about whether it is realistic. In what ways might research knowledge be a useful skill for the job that you envision?

Sociologists work in a wide variety of domains, including social services, government, health care, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, law enforcement and legal services, marketing, international development work, education, and human resources, just to name a few! In all of these fields, being able to locate, understand, critique, and communicate research findings is an important job skill.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.3

Questioning News Sources

In this activity, you will critique the way in which social science research is described in a news media article.

In 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNBC.com published an article titled "Science says pets can buffer stress, boost productivity and help keep you healthy while you WFH [work from home]" (Stieg, 2020). The article contends that pets help to reduce stress and bolster happiness and work productivity, stating:

> *A 2012 study from Virginia Commonwealth University found that employees at a retail business who brought their dogs to work had higher job satisfaction than industry norms and had the lowest levels of stress ratings throughout the day. Of those dog owners who came to work with a dog, 50% said that having their pet present was important to their productivity.*

The research study to which the CNBC article refers, titled "Preliminary investigation of employee's dog presence on stress and organizational perceptions" (Barker et al., 2012), compares the levels of stress, job satisfaction, and perceptions of the employer of three groups: one in which employees brought their dogs to work, a second in which employees did not bring their dogs to work, and another group of workers who didn't have pets. The research article describes the results as follows:

> *Combined groups scored significantly higher on multiple job satisfaction subscales than the reference norm group for these scales. No significant differences were found between the groups on physiological stress or perceived organizational support. Although perceived stress was similar at*

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baseline; over the course of the day, stress declined for the DOG group with their dogs present and increased for the NODOG and NOPET groups. The NODOG group had significantly higher stress than the DOG group by the end of the day. A significant difference was found in the stress patterns for the DOG group on days their dogs were present and absent. On dog absent days, owners' stress increased throughout the day, mirroring the pattern of the NODOG group.

Think about the difference between the two descriptions of this research study.

1. Compare and contrast the titles of each piece. Does one suggest more certainty than the other?
2. How would you describe the tone of each piece? Which words or phrases convey the tone?
3. Consider the fact that the original study focused on a workplace of 450 people and the CNBC.com report is focused on the effects of dog ownership while people are working from home. Do you think that dogs have a similar effect on productivity in home and office settings? Why or why not?
4. The original study examines dog ownership, but the headline of the CNBC.com article speaks of "pets" more generally. Do you think that all pets have similar effects on stress and productivity? Why do you think the CNBC article uses the language of pets more broadly?

Check Your Understanding

1. How can you utilize healthy skepticism to question information when making a consequential life decision?
2. How can a good working knowledge of how to evaluate sources help you to become media literate?
3. What research skills are important for informed citizens?
4. In what ways might knowledge of social science research assist you in obtaining or performing a job?

THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH FOR SOCIETY

We've discussed why understanding how to "do" and critique social science research is useful for you, personally. But how is such research beneficial for society? There are numerous ways in which social research can make the world a better place. Let's examine some of the primary societal benefits of social research.

Document Social Inequalities, Societal Transformations, and Emerging Issues

Society often changes very rapidly. Social science research allows us to document changing social relations. In 2020, people around the world were thrown into a crisis as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families were forced to quarantine at home. Some workers were able to work remotely, but millions of workers were laid off from their jobs, as shown via data regarding unemployment provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the United States alone, well over 100,000 people lost their lives to the virus.

In the midst of the crisis, issues of inequality emerged and were covered in the mainstream press. After politicians and journalists started to call for data on infections and deaths to be released organized by racial and ethnic categories, it became clear that there were disparities in terms of which groups were being infected and dying at higher rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began to release data in April of 2020 that indicated that Black and Latinx Americans were disproportionately affected by the virus, with respect to infections and deaths. Early statistics indicated that Black people represented 34% of infections, but only made up 13% of the overall population of the United States (Artiga et al., 2020). Not only were communities of color being hit harder by the virus's effects, but these communities were also more likely to experience some of the secondary problems caused by COVID-19, such as job loss and food insecurity (Ro, 2020).

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People of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as this protester conveys.

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The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of social science data and the organizations tasked with supplying such data. Without the CDC, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and World Health Organization, we would not be able to identify the uneven toll that the COVID-19 pandemic took across racial and ethnic groups. The data they provide are pivotal for documenting and understanding the social determinants of health inequities. ◆

Challenging Stereotypes and Misinformation

Another benefit that social research has for society is that it enables us to challenge misinformation and stereotypes. You have likely heard our current era described as the "information age." We are flooded by information on social media, on 24-hour news networks, the radio, and other places, but as discussed previously, the information broadcasted is not always true. Politicians, celebrities, and influencers make claims about the world that are often "liked" or otherwise supported by thousands of people, giving credibility to these claims even if they are baseless.

Consider when, in 2015, Donald Trump announced his presidential campaign and, in his speech, characterized Mexican immigrants as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists. He said, "They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Lee, 2015). Journalists, social scientists, and everyday people turned immediately to social science research, which overwhelmingly showed this stereotype to be untrue. As the National Academies Press (2016) and several others summarized, social science research shows that immigrants have significantly lower crime rates than native-born populations, and communities with a high proportion of immigrants have lower crime rates compared to those with lower proportions of immigration. Social science research was pivotal to addressing this misinformation.

Social science research can not only provide evidence that a claim is incorrect, but it can also complicate statements that are overly general. You may have heard, for example, about the gender wage gap in the United States: the fact that, among full-time, year-round workers in the United States, men continue to earn significantly more than women. But did you know that among workers with a bachelor's degree or higher, the gender wage gap is significantly worse?

Figure 1.1 shows data collected and analyzed by researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau in 2017. It shows how differences in wages vary for workers of different education levels, and also different ages. Among workers with a bachelor's degree or higher difference in the "median" or typical wage for men and women workers is about $21,000. For men and women without a bachelor's degree, the difference is a little less than $10,000. But note that men and women without a bachelor's degree typically make substantially less than men and women with a bachelor's degree. And, of course, these earning figures are further complicated when race, ethnicity, and occupation are included as well. Knowledge of sociological research methods can help us, as a society, to challenge misinformation and oversimplistic claims.

CONSIDER THIS...

Why do you think the gender wage gap is bigger among workers with higher levels of education compared to those with lower levels of education?

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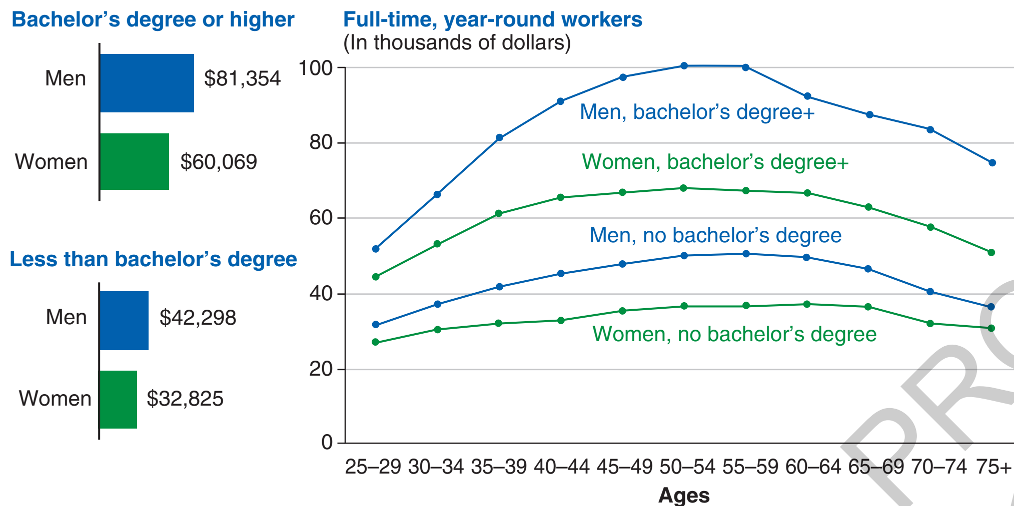
FIGURE 1.1 ■ Median Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers by Education Attainment for Men and Women



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey.

Inform Public Policies and Programs

Another way in which social science research benefits society as a whole is by its use in policy and program evaluation. Around the world, federal, state, and local governments, international organizations, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies collectively invest billions of dollars to address social problems and to create a better world. How do we know if the programs, policies, initiatives, and products they create are actually achieving their desired goals? Social science research, grounded in solid research methods, is key.

Consider the issue of government funding for early childhood education. Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs that promote "the school readiness of children from birth to age five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development." The programs also offer some services to low-income women who are pregnant (Benefits.gov, n.d.). According to a 2018 report from the Congressional Budget Office, the program served approximately 900,000 children in 2017 and cost taxpayers approximately $9 billion (averaging approximately $10,000 per child). These are big numbers. Is the program worth it? Social science research can't tell us if the program is worth it from a moral or ethical point of view, but it can help to clarify the social and economic impact of the program. In fact, analyses of Head Start's return on investment show that the program actually *saves* taxpayers money in the long term—and lots of it! Early education programs help young people to do better in school, graduate from high school, and earn higher wages. By promoting education, investments in early childhood education are also investments in health, well-being, and economic growth. And these outcomes are shown again and again in social science research (Heckman, 2017; https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf).

Let's consider a very different example. Your campus almost certainly has policies in place to prohibit unwanted sexual conduct between students. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education changed these policies, and under the Trump administration, the policies changed again. Many people speculated about the impact these changes would have on students, colleges, and universities. Social science research tracking the extent of sexual violence on campus, feelings of comfort and discomfort for students of all genders, instances of interpersonal sexism, changes to institutional support for gender-related issues, and institutional funding patterns more generally, can help us turn speculation into empirical research. The findings from this research can help us to ground the debate about campus sexual harassment and gendered violence in real-world evidence, which in turn can help us to design and sustain policies and programs in line with our values and goals.

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Strengthening Democracy

Public knowledge of social science is also critical for a healthy democracy. In order for a democracy to function well, citizens need to be informed as to issues that are taking place within their town, state, country, and even globally. As discussed previously, much of this information is generated from social science research— research describing patterns and trends in social life, health, and well-being. For democracy to live up to its ideal, members of society need not only to have this information but must also be able to make sense of this information, discuss it, and respond to it in a meaningful way. By learning the ins and outs of sociological research, critically evaluating the claims and information you encounter, and sharing what you know with others, you are actually helping to strengthen our democratic society.

Perhaps even more importantly, learning about sociological research methods sets you up to make a meaningful contribution to collective knowledge—a chance for you to ask and find answers to the questions that are most important for you and your community. As we will discuss throughout this book, putting sociology into action can empower you and your community, and help to build a more socially just world.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.4

Checking Your Own Misconceptions

In this exercise, you will compare your own perceptions of U.S. society to real-world data.

The U.S. Census Bureau collects data on the characteristics of the U.S. population. Take a moment to consider how you would respond to these questions:

- About how many people are there in the United States?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States are foreign-born?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States are veterans?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States describe themselves as having some sort of disability?
- About what is the typical household income?
- About what percentage of children under the age of 18 are living in poverty?

Now consider the actual data. According to the U.S. Census Bureau:

- The total U.S. population is 328,239,523.
- 13.7% of the people living in the United States are foreign-born.
- 6.9% of people living in the United States are veterans.
- 12.7% of people living in the United States describe themselves as having a disability.
- The median household income is $65,712.
- 16.8% of children under the age of 18 are living in poverty.

Write your answers to the following questions:

1. How greatly did your perceptions vary from the actual data?
2. Are you surprised by any of these findings? Why or why not?
3. Choose one fact that stands out to you as particularly interesting or important. What makes this information especially interesting or important?

Check Your Understanding

1. How does social science research help us to understand social inequalities?
2. How can social science research help us to combat stereotypes and misinformation?
3. How might social science research inform policies and programs that affect our lives?
4. In what ways can social science research help us to strengthen democracy?

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CONCLUSION

You should now have a greater understanding of what social science entails, how it has the potential to benefit you, and how it has the potential to benefit society as a whole. It is important to keep in mind that humans cannot always perceive the world accurately due to misperceptions. As a result, we can utilize the scientific method, which allows us to gather empirical observations about the world around us. This systematic approach to accumulating accurate information is indispensable. By increasing our knowledge of how to conduct and evaluate social science research, we are strengthening our own skills: our ability to use research to make decisions, to navigate a complex media landscape, to understand job prospects, and to become better citizens. Finally, it is important to recognize the many ways in which social science research can make the world a better place. Some of these ways include documenting social inequalities, disputing harmful stereotypes, informing policies and programs, and strengthening democracy. In the next chapter, you will begin your journey into learning about sociological research by starting to understand the role of theory, or explanations about patterns in social life.

REVIEW

1.1 What is sociology? What is social science?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how society shapes individual people and groups, as well as how individual people and groups shape society. Sociologists research all sorts of people, doing all sorts of things, in all sorts of contexts, in order to understand the relationship between individuals and society. Sociology is part of a larger body of theory, knowledge, and research techniques known as social science. Social science is a form of science that investigates the social world. As a science, social science is an approach to knowledge generation that focuses on collecting data—or observations—using our senses, from the world around us. Scientists use theoretical explanations about such observations as a way to make sense of possible patterns in data. Those patterns can lead scientists to generate hypotheses, or testable statements that make predictions about how the world works. Those hypotheses are then tested using more observations, and the cycle begins again.

1.2 How do sociological research and the scientific method help us to overcome everyday misperceptions?

There are at least four types of everyday misperceptions: Overgeneralization occurs when you rely on a few of your own experiences to make broad claims about other situations or other groups. Selective perception is when we pay attention to those things, people, and experiences with which we are most familiar or that align with things that we already believe to be true. Reasoning illogically means that we have come to conclusions based on a misinterpretation of the evidence at hand, usually because of faulty assumptions about that evidence. And being resistant to change is when we fail to change our minds in light of new evidence. The scientific method helps us to overcome these misperceptions by guiding us to make systematic observations about the social world, to argue logically about the explanations for the patterns that we detect, and to be open to new information that could result in a different explanation for a pattern.

1.3 What are ways in which social science research is valuable as a life skill?

With respect to making sound life decisions, a critical mindset that you will develop through learning about sociological research is healthy skepticism, which will allow you to synthesize information and evaluate competing claims. Another important life skill is media literacy. Much of what is presented can be distorted or exaggerated. Having the ability to sort fact from fiction in news accounts, advertisements, and fictional portrayals is called being media literate. A third way in which social science knowledge is valuable is in the context of working in a career. Many career paths utilize sociological research. Even if you don't envision yourself doing research

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someday, it's quite possible that you might need to consume or explain social research to others in the course of your job. Finally, learning about social science research can also give you insight into the types of laws, policies, and programs that govern much of our social life. There is currently a tremendous amount of disagreement in the United States around a wide variety of social policies. Understanding social research that examines such policies can make you a better citizen.

1.4 How does social science research benefit society?

Social science research helps us to document social inequalities, societal transformations, and emerging issues. Society often changes very rapidly. Social science research allows us to understand changing social relations. Another benefit that social research has for society is that it enables us to challenge misinformation and stereotypes. Research can be gathered to dispute claims that might malign a particular group of individuals. A third way in which social science research benefits society as a whole is by its use in policy and program evaluation. How do we know if the programs, policies, initiatives, and products they create are actually achieving their desired goals? Social science research, grounded in solid research methods, is key. Finally, for democracy to live up to its ideal, members of society need not only to have information, but must also be able to make sense of this information, discuss it, and respond to it in a meaningful way. By learning the ins and outs of sociological research, critically evaluating the claims and information you encounter, and sharing what you know with others, you are actually helping to strengthen our democratic society.

KEY TERMS

empirical data
hypotheses
intersubjectivity
media literate
objective
referendum
replicable
scientific method
sociology
systematic data collection

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2 POSING QUESTIONS, CRAFTING EXPLANATIONS, AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Mellisa Holtzman

STUDENT LEARNING QUESTIONS

2.1 What are the three major sociological theoretical perspectives, and why is theory important?

2.2 How do sociologists generate research questions?

2.3 What are key aspects of the sociological research process?

2.4 How do sociologists communicate their research results, and what are the major parts of a research article?

In Chapter 1, you learned about the importance of social science research and the basic forms it takes. With that background information in mind, you are now ready to learn about the research process. Of course, this entire text is devoted to that topic, but this chapter will provide you with an overview of the process in its entirety. Later chapters will address specific aspects of the research process in more detail.

As the chapter title suggests, you can think of research as a process where sociologists (1) pose questions, (2) craft explanations, and then (3) communicate results. While true, there is actually a step that precedes these. Sociologists must start the research process by first consulting theory.

HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

Mellisa Holtzman

I started college as a psychology major. I knew I wanted to work with people and make a difference in the world. Psychology seemed like a good fit.

All was well until my sophomore year, when I took a class called "Perception." I naively believed this class would be about ESP, intuition, and other "fun" aspects of perception. I quickly discovered the class was about how the brain processes the information we perceive with our senses. I felt like I was in a biology class, and I hated it.

This class helped me realize that I did not enjoy psychology's focus on the internal processes of humans. Instead, I was far more interested in how society influences individuals. In other words, I was curious about factors that are external to humans. So, I switched my major to sociology and invested myself in understanding how culture affects people and how people, in turn, can shape and change culture. Eventually this gave rise to my interest in sexual-assault prevention.

WHAT IS THEORY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Theory refers to the general or abstract principles associated with a particular discipline—in this case, sociology. **Sociological theory**, then, represents a set of background perspectives about how the social world operates. These background perspectives are important because they shape not only the kinds of

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questions sociologists ask, but also how they interpret the data they collect. In effect, theory serves as a lens through which we view the social world. As such, it is an important first step in sociological research.

Theories

Within sociology, there are three primary theoretical perspectives that inform our understandings of the social world. **Functionalism** is the perspective most closely associated with Émile Durkheim. Durkheim was a French intellectual writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He is widely considered the father of sociology because he was one of the first scholars to advocate for sociology as a distinct discipline. He argued that individuals' behaviors are shaped by the society in which they live and that a full understanding of human behavior must account for the impact of these outside influences (which he called **social facts**). Sociology, he asserted, was the discipline best suited to that task (Pampel, 2007).

Durkheim was interested in how large collections of individuals—all of whom have their own interests and needs—could work together in a coordinated way. Functionalist theory thus argues that society is composed of interrelated systems that shape and constrain individuals, and in so doing, help create, maintain, and stabilize that society (Durkheim, 1893/1984). For instance, societies rely on a number of institutions, including the political system, legal system, and educational system, to meet citizens' needs. But these institutions do more than just deliver goods and services to the populace. They also constrain the behaviors of the people who come in contact with them. For instance, the political system regulates how people interact with the government, the legal system regulates how people interact with one another, and the education system regulates how people interact with and access information. All of this regulation ensures some level of uniformity and order within society, thereby making large-scale cooperation possible. In short, functionalist theory proposes that every institution in society has an important part to play in the maintenance and stabilization of society. From this we can see that functionalist theory focuses on the *benefits* of institutions and social patterns for society.

Conflict theory, in contrast, tends to focus on the strife that institutions and social patterns create in society. Conflict theory is most closely associated with Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx and Weber both argued that institutions produce inequalities of power and resources in society. Marx, who was writing during the height of the industrial revolution in Europe, focused on social inequality related to ownership and wealth. Marx saw society as divided into two main groups: the wealthy capitalists (also called **bourgeoisie**) who own the technology and resources to make things and the workers who struggle day to day to make ends meet (also called the **proletariat**) (Marx, 1867/1977). Marx was highly critical of the long work hours, dangerous working conditions, and dismal wages 19th-century workers faced, especially since those same conditions were creating tremendous wealth for capitalists. He also argued that capitalists purposely used society's institutions, like religion, media, and politics, to keep workers divided from one another and thus unable to protest effectively against their unfair treatment. Marx saw power struggles between the capitalists and workers as *the* defining feature of the social world—all human experiences, he argued, are fundamentally shaped by our place within this particular power struggle.

Writing more than 50 years after Marx, Weber saw power in more complex terms. Weber challenged Marx's argument that power and inequalities can be understood solely in terms of economic position. Weber argued that power stems not only from people's economic situation, which he called their **class position**, but from two additional sources. **Status positions** give people unequal access to prestige and social honor and **party position** gives people unequal access to special interest groups, such as unions, lobbies, and political associations (Weber, 1925/1978). For instance, in our society most people believe that teachers fulfill a very important and highly valued role; thus, they are held in relatively high

The status of essential workers, such as warehouse workers, changed as a result of COVID-19, as the importance of the role they play was fully recognized.

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esteem. Yet, despite having an esteemed status position, they often receive fairly low pay. As a consequence, their class position is lower than their status position. Importantly, one way for teachers to try to increase their class position is by participating in a union—it is through this party position that they can gain some additional power and push for higher pay and better benefits. Thus, while Marx focused only on power differentials based on wealth, Weber emphasized the more nuanced ways that power can operate in a society. In so doing, he gave us a powerful set of conceptual tools.

Although there are significant differences between the perspectives of Marx and Weber they share a focus on power and inequality, and that is what sets conflict theory apart from functionalism. Conflict theory tends to focus on the struggles that individuals and groups engage in as they vie for power. Rather than seeing institutions as entities that benefit society, conflict theorists view institutions as sites that often maintain inequalities, creating further conflict and strife. Many modern conflict theorists, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Patricia Hill Collins, have illustrated the degree to which these inequalities are also grounded in race, gender, and sexuality.

Symbolic interactionism (sometimes abbreviated as SI theory) is the last of the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. This theory is most closely associated with the work of George Herbert Mead, a scholar who was intensely interested in social reform and helping oppressed individuals (Pampel, 2007). In fact, his interest in helping others is one of the primary reasons why SI theory is so very different from functionalism and conflict theory.

Mead was concerned with how a person's social interactions—with their parents, friends, and teachers, for example—would influence the development of their sense of self and their life experiences (Mead, 1934/1962). Thus, unlike conflict theory and functionalism, both of which use a **macro approach** for understanding the social world, symbolic interactionism uses a **micro approach**. A macro approach is one that focuses on large-scale entities and institutions, like the economy, politics, law, and education. A micro approach is one that emphasizes individual-level and group-level interactions.

Mead's focus on social interactions is an important aspect of SI theory because he argued that social interactions create, sustain, and transform the social world. He—and many of his students—argued that the social world was produced *entirely* through social interactions. From this perspective, things like race, gender, marriage, and even religion do not have a pre-determined, inherent meaning. Rather, repeated social interactions produce the meanings and hierarchies associated with socially constructed characteristics, events, and identities. For instance, although there is no biological evidence for the belief that some races are superior to others, humans have, for a variety of historical reasons, created this idea. As our interactions continue over time, this idea is continually reinforced and maintained—so much so, that we eventually forget we created it in the first place and we assume it is based on some kind of natural truth. This perspective on the creation and maintenance of social meaning is often referred to as "the social construction of reality," and it is a direct outgrowth of SI theory.

CONSIDERTHIS...

Which theory resonates most with your world view? Why do you think you prefer this theory?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.1

Sociological Theory

In this exercise, you will test your knowledge of sociological theory.

1. What is functionalism?
   a. A theory that suggests power dynamics are the most important variable for understanding society's functioning
   b. A theory that suggests all parts of a society are important for that society's functioning
   c. A theory that suggests social realities are created during and through human interactions
   d. A theory that focuses on how intersecting identities affect an individual's life experiences

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2. What is conflict theory?
   a. A theory that is based, in part, on Durkheim's work
   b. A theory that focuses on power
   c. A theory that focuses on the interrelated parts of a society
   d. A theory that focuses on women's subordinate position in society
3. What is symbolic interactionism?
   a. A theory that suggests humans have the capacity to interpret symbols during interactions
   b. A theory that suggests power dynamics are the most important variable for understanding society's functioning
   c. A theory that suggests social realities are created by societal structures
   d. A theory based in part on Marx's work
4. Why is Weber characterized as a conflict theorist?

Why Theory Matters

What does all of this theory have to do with the research process? Theory shapes the way sociologists ask questions, interpret data, and come to understand the social world. Let's consider the issue of inequality to further illustrate this point. A functionalist analyzing inequality might first note that most societies—if not all—have some degree of inequality. They might then consider the possible benefits that inequality brings to society. For example, a functionalist would argue that inequality in wages and wealth promotes hard work. By rewarding socially important positions with higher pay and status, inequality encourages talented and hard-working people to aim for these important positions. Notice that our perspective here is shaped in two important ways by our reliance on functionalism: (1) we are focusing on the possible positive contributions of inequality, and (2) we are using a macro orientation to ask how inequality benefits society rather than how it harms individuals.

Now let's consider how a conflict perspective makes sense of inequality. This perspective focuses on the ways that inequality *harms* groups of people. A conflict theorist would likely ask questions like: How do powerful groups of people (business owners, politicians, boards of directors, etc.) maintain their power and keep more subordinate groups of people (laborers, citizens, consumers, etc.) from threatening it? This is a very different way of looking at inequality! We are no longer trying to examine the benefits of inequality; instead, our focus is on the conflict and strife it causes between groups. Notice, however, that our focus is similar to functionalism in one way: We are still operating at the macro level, and that is because conflict theory focuses on how groups of people vie for power and how societal structures and institutions keep power in the hands of some and out of the hands of others.

Lastly, what would a symbolic interactionist perspective on inequality look like? Because SI theory operates at the micro level, our focus will be on how an individual's interactions with the world promote and maintain inequality. An SI theorist might ask how interactions within poor neighborhoods, schools, and family environments shape the way economically disadvantaged children come to understand their place in the world. Using an SI theory framework, we are less inclined to ask what the benefits or harms of inequality are; instead, we are likely to ask what inequality *means* for the people who experience it and how that meaning then shapes their future. Table 2.1 provides an overview of how each of these three major theories view different systems.

As you can see, theory is important in shaping how sociologists understand the social world. Theory is foundational to all that we do. Now that we understand the connection between theory and the research process, we can start to examine the other steps in the research process.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is theory, and why is it important in the research process?
2. What are the primary differences among functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism?
3. How do these differences impact the way sociologists ask questions about and come to understand the social world?

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TABLE 2.1 ■ Variations in Perspective Based on Theory

	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism
Family	Provides economic support	Promotes gender inequality	Shapes a person's identity
Religion	Promotes a moral code	Separates people by beliefs	Promotes ritualized behaviors
Inequality	Motivates hard work	Creates divisions by class	Affects childhood socialization
Crime	Creates jobs (police, etc.)	Results in unfair profiling	Creates a culture of fear

POSING QUESTIONS

Why are divorced mothers more likely to have custody of their children than are divorced fathers? How do Black and Latinx individuals respond to and cope with housing discrimination? What types of community characteristics promote good health and wellbeing? These are just a few examples of **sociological questions**—questions that seek to understand the complex relationships between people and society.

Sociologists regularly pose questions about the social world. In doing so, though, they must be mindful of the difference between empirical and non-empirical questions, and inductive and deductive questions.

Empirical and Non-empirical Questions

Empirical questions are those you can answer with scientific data. In other words, you can use the steps of the research process to arrive at an answer to the question. Each of the three questions listed in the preceding section is an empirical question. We can use science to determine the processes that make it more likely that women have custody of their children than men, to identify how Black and Latinx individuals respond when they experience housing discrimination, and to identify the characteristics of communities that are associated with positive health outcomes.

Non-empirical questions, in contrast, are those that cannot be answered scientifically. They tend to be more opinion based—for instance, are mothers better parents than fathers, are white Americans better home-buyers than Black and Latinx Americans, and what are the qualities of good communities? These questions cannot be definitively answered using scientific methods, in part because what makes someone a "better" parent, home-buyer, or something a "better" community cannot be conclusively defined. Instead, it is a matter of opinion.

As sociologists, we need to ask empirical questions. Sociology is an empirical discipline and sociologists are scientists. This is an important point because sometimes people fail to recognize sociological questions as scientific questions. People often assume that science deals with the natural world or chemical reactions, but social issues can be subject to scientific scrutiny as well.

CONSIDER THIS...

Why do you think some questions are easily recognized as scientific issues while others often are not?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.2

Creating Empirical Questions

In this exercise, you will practice developing empirical questions.

Questions about emotions, feelings, and subjective perceptions can be asked in a way that is empirical. Using what you've learned about empirical questions, answer the following questions:

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1. Develop an empirical question about happiness.
2. Develop an empirical question about perceptions of friendly behavior.
3. Develop an empirical question about shyness.
4. Develop an empirical question about a concept of your choice.

Inductive and Deductive Questions

Inductive reasoning involves moving from the specific to the general. **Inductive questions**, then, are those that result from specific observations of facts that a researcher thinks might point to a general tendency. Imagine that a researcher knows of 50 divorced couples with children, and in 48 cases the mothers have custody of their children. They may wonder whether this fact illustrates a broader pattern whereby mothers are given custody of their children more often than fathers. They might then generate broader research questions: Do divorced mothers generally get custody of their children more often than divorced fathers? If so, why?

Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, starts from general theory and moves toward specific examples. **Deductive questions** start with a theoretical premise that a researcher hopes to verify by examining specific observations in the social world. For instance, gender socialization theory suggests that females are taught to be caregivers, nurturers, and primary parents to children while males are taught to be breadwinners, protectors, and secondary parents to children. Given this theoretical understanding of gender roles, a researcher could set out to determine how these cultural ideas influence child custody decisions. They might ask: Do societal gender role expectations affect custody placements at divorce? And if so, how?

Sociologists ask inductive questions in some cases, and deductive questions in others. The distinction between the two types of questions is important, though, because they start and end in different places. Inductive questions start with specific patterns in social life and end by generating a general explanation for those patterns—in other words, they end by generating theory. Deductive questions are the exact opposite—they start with an existing theoretical premise and seek to test the validity of that premise by examining specific patterns in social life. In fact, here's a quick way to help you remember the difference between inductive and deductive questions. *Inductive* is associated with specific *observations* and both of these words begin with vowels, while *deductive* is associated with general *theory* and both of these words begin with consonants.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the difference between empirical and non-empirical questions?
2. What are inductive and deductive questions?
3. Why are these distinctions important?

CRAFTING EXPLANATIONS

Once we have posed a research question, we want to try to answer it. The process of crafting explanations starts by reviewing what other researchers have written on the topic. This is called a **literature review.** Sociologists read the existing research, articles, and books that address the issue they are studying. Through this process, they see which theoretical perspectives other researchers have used to understand the issue. They also develop a solid understanding of what is known about the issue and what remains to be learned.

A literature review is an important step in the research process for three reasons. First, it saves researchers from "reinventing the wheel"—investigating a question that has a well-established answer, or conducting a study that has already been conducted multiple times. Second, reviewing the existing research on a topic can help researchers refine their research question. By knowing what others have already discovered about this topic, we can sharpen and narrow our own research questions. Third, and most important, science is most useful when it builds off of itself. As sociologists, we want to ensure

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that we are helping move our discipline forward. The best way to do that is to be certain we are always engaged in a dialogue with one another. Understanding the work that precedes our own is the best way to engage in that dialogue and continue to enhance our collective understanding of the social world.

Developing a Research Design

The next step in the process of crafting explanations is to develop a research design. This is when sociologists articulate their hypotheses and identify their independent and dependent variables.

A **hypothesis** is an unverified but testable statement that a researcher believes represents a potential answer to their research question. In other words, it is an educated guess—and that guess is based, in part, on sociological theory and the previously completed literature review. For instance, imagine that a sociologist wants to understand why poverty rates in the United States are significantly higher than poverty rates in other wealthy Western nations. After reading the existing literature on poverty and considering both functionalism and conflict theory, they might offer the following two hypotheses as potential answers to the research question:

1. Poverty rates are higher in the United States than in most other wealthy Western nations because a higher proportion of U.S. citizens choose not to pursue the education and training necessary to secure high-paying jobs.
2. Poverty rates are higher in the United States than in most other wealthy Western nations because U.S. tax laws perpetuate income and wealth disparities.

Notice the specificity of these hypotheses. Although they are both "educated guesses," the guesses are informed by the existing research literature and theoretical perspectives in the field. The background information that this prior research and theory provide is precisely what allows for the formulation of detailed hypotheses. That, in turn, is what keeps advancing scientific knowledge.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.3

Creating a Hypothesis

In this exercise, you will formulate a sociological research question.

1. Select something in the social world that intrigues you (e.g., social media, dating patterns, homelessness, economic inequality, day care for children, etc.), then list what you know about this issue.
2. Why do you think your chosen issue is important in life? How do you think it might be related to other social issues like gender, age, race, religion, etc.?
3. Write a research question based on your chosen social issue.
4. Write at least one hypothesis for your research question. Be sure to be specific—your hypothesis should not be answerable by a simple yes or no.

After formulating their hypotheses, sociologists must identify their independent and dependent variables. **Variables** are elements of the social world that can have more than one value. For instance, in the hypotheses about poverty rates, a country's poverty rate is a variable, the tax laws are a variable, and the educational motivation of citizens is a variable. **Independent variables** (IV) are those variables that sociologists believe will impact some aspect of the social world. In the example given, the researcher believes tax laws and/or motivation levels may influence poverty rates. These concepts represent the independent variables—those are the things expected to cause a change in something else. **Dependent variables** (DV), then, are those variables that sociologists expect to be changed by something else. In this case, the level of poverty within a country is the dependent variable because the researcher believes it will be impacted by tax laws and the citizenry's motivations.

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CONSIDER THIS…

What are the IV and DV for this hypothesis? "Children who spend their leisure time playing outdoors have better health outcomes than children who spend their time watching television."

Collecting Data

So how do sociologists answer their research questions and test their hypotheses? They collect and analyze data from the social world. **Collecting data** involves gathering information about the social world. **Analyzing data** refers to making sense of the information that has been gathered.

Let's consider **surveys** as an example. Surveys involve asking **research subjects** (the people being studied) to respond to a series of questions that are purposely designed to elicit information about the researcher's topic of interest. For instance, imagine a sociologist wants to understand minority group members' perceptions of local police officers. They may generate a set of survey questions that ask minority respondents to report on how much they trust, admire, dislike, are comfortable with, and/or are suspicious of local police officers. These questions will typically be asked on paper or through an online system. Collecting data in this way is both efficient and cost-effective. It allows the researcher to gather a great deal of relatively uniform data from a large number of people.

Surveys are only one example of how sociologists can collect data. They can also use interviews, participant observation, existing documents, and experiments. Upcoming chapters will discuss various data collection methods in more detail.

Analyzing Data and Drawing Conclusions

Regardless of the data collection method sociologists use, once they have gathered their data, they must make sense of them. Data analysis can take many forms. For instance, survey data are often analyzed using **quantitative methods**—this means researchers transform respondents' answers into numbers, enter those numbers into spreadsheets, and then use statistical programs such as Excel, SPSS, or R to help them test their hypotheses. Alternatively, data can also be analyzed using **qualitative methods**. In this case, data are left in textual form and sociologists look for common words and phrases used by the respondents. Patterns in the way these words and phrases are used are then grouped by theme (similarities in the messages they portray) and those themes help sociologists tell the story revealed in the data.

When using qualitative methods, sociologists look for patterns in the words and phrases of respondents in order to find larger themes in their research.

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The differences between quantitative and qualitative analyses are important and will be discussed at length in later chapters. For now, let's return to our earlier discussion of theory because it also plays an important role in the analysis process. Because theory is the lens through which sociologists make sense of the social world, it is critical for helping sociologists contextualize their research findings. For instance, imagine you are a sociologist with an interest in crime. You have gathered data on crime rates for your city and asked city residents, politicians, and employees (police officers, court officials, etc.) to discuss how crime has or has not impacted their lives. If you analyze your data using a functionalist perspective, you will likely be attuned to the possible benefits of crime for your respondents (it creates jobs for police officers and court officials). If you use a conflict perspective, you will likely focus on the various ways power differentials impact people's perceptions of crime (individuals with arrest records likely view the legal process with more suspicion

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and doubt than do victims, politicians, and police officers). And, if you use a symbolic interactionist perspective, you will likely emphasize what crime means to various individuals (victims of crime may feel violated while perpetrators of crime may feel they had few other choices available to them).

In short, a sociologist's theoretical approach informs not only which research questions they ask, but also the lens through which they collect and interpret their data. This is very important. Sometimes students ask: Isn't it problematic that the answers to research questions change based on the theory a sociologist uses? Doesn't that introduce potential bias? Shouldn't research questions have only one right answer? These are certainly meaningful and even understandable questions, but the answer to each of them is "not necessarily." The social world is incredibly complex. Human lives and the structures we create are messy. Consequently, there is often more than one way to define a situation. This means we frequently need multiple perspectives on the same issue. One sociologist can use one theoretical perspective to understand a particular facet of an issue. A second sociologist can then use a different theory to understand some other facet of that same issue. Why? Because research questions do not always have a single right answer. Making sense of the world we live in requires that we consider our data through a number of theoretical perspectives. When we do that, we have the best chance of understanding and shaping our social lives.

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

Chadwick Menning

Several years ago, Chadwick Menning developed an interest in sexual assault prevention on college campuses. Advocates, the media, and politicians were frequently noting that one in five college women experience a completed or attempted assault during their college career. As a result, he began to wonder what existing prevention efforts looked like on college campuses. He also wondered if those efforts could be improved. Eventually, he and colleague Mellisa Holtzman turned this curiosity into a sociological research question: What programming features increase the effectiveness of campus sexual assault prevention programs?

A review of the existing research literature made it clear that there are two broad types of prevention programs in existence:

1. Primary prevention programs provide educational information on consent, party culture, and the role of alcohol in assault. Their goal is to change the way people think about sex and assault in an effort to change our cultural understandings of these issues.
2. Risk reduction programs provide self-defense training to potential victims. Their goal is to equip individuals with the tools needed to protect themselves if they are in a dangerous situation.

The literature review also revealed that most campuses favor primary prevention programs over risk reduction programs. This means students are rarely exposed to both curriculums.

Based on this literature, they developed a hypothesis:

- College sexual assault prevention programs that address both primary prevention and risk reduction will be more effective at lowering assault rates than programs that focus on only one type of programming.

Testing this hypothesis required several steps. First, they *designed* a program that combined primary prevention and risk reduction. To do that they enlisted the help of 15 college students who spent an entire semester working alongside them to create and refine a new type of sexual assault protection program (Holtzman & Menning, 2015). This program is called Elemental.

Second, they collected survey data on students who took the program *and* on those who did not take it. They did this because they wanted to determine if Elemental participants exhibited lower assault risk than students who had not participated in the program.

Third, they used quantitative analyses to examine students' experiences with assault. They found that Elemental students experience a 66% reduction in their risk of assault compared to students who have not taken the program (Holtzman & Menning, 2019; Menning & Holtzman, 2015). And, most important, their analyses suggested this effect is due, in part, to the fact the program offers training in both primary prevention and risk reduction (Menning & Holtzman, 2020). In short, their hypothesis was supported.

Chadwick Menning is a professor of sociology at Ball State University and a co-creator of Elemental.

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Discussion Question

Which steps of the research process do you see in the discussion of Elemental?

Check Your Understanding

1. Why is reviewing the literature an important step in the research process?
2. What are hypotheses, and how does theory impact their formulation?
3. What are independent and dependent variables?
4. How does theory factor into the data analysis process?

COMMUNICATING RESULTS

The final step in the research process is communicating the results—but that can mean a variety of things, including communicating findings to other scientists, to policy makers, and to the public. Importantly, the type of audience with whom a sociologist hopes to communicate will affect the strategies they use for disseminating their findings.

Conveying Findings

Many sociologists—especially those who work at universities or research institutes—put considerable effort into communicating their results to other scientists. This is important because peer-to-peer communication is how a discipline grows. Scientists read each other's work and build off it (recall the literature review process discussed earlier in this chapter). There are two primary venues used for this kind of communication. First, sociologists publish their work in **academic journals**. These publications feature scientific articles describing their research question, hypotheses, methods, analyses, and findings. Getting one's work published in a journal, however, is not an easy process. Authors must first submit their work to the journal editor for consideration. If the editor sees promise, they will send a blinded (anonymous) copy out to two or three other scientists in this field. The job of these scientists is to conduct a thorough **peer review**. They scrutinize the author's research methods and findings, point out weaknesses, and make suggestions for improvements. They also offer a recommendation to the editor regarding whether or not the paper should be accepted for publication, rejected (declined), or given a "revise and resubmit" (a chance to make changes and try again). Often papers go through a series of peer reviews before being accepted for publication. It is not uncommon for an article to spend a year or more in the review and publication process. This helps ensure published work is rigorous, meaningful, and as unbiased as possible.

Academic journals are an important vessel for disseminating research findings to others in the academic community.

Zoonar GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo

Because science relies so heavily on peer dialogue, another way for sociologists to disseminate their findings is through **academic conference presentations**. In this instance, they present their findings to a live audience during a formal presentation. Often, they are presenting work when it is in its early stages—perhaps preliminary findings—and asking the audience for feedback. This allows sociologists to refine their studies before submitting the final work to a journal for consideration.

Sociologists do not always want to convey their findings to strictly scientific audiences, though. In fact, **applied sociologists**—sometimes called **public sociologists**—are often more concerned with disseminating their findings to policy makers, community organizations, and

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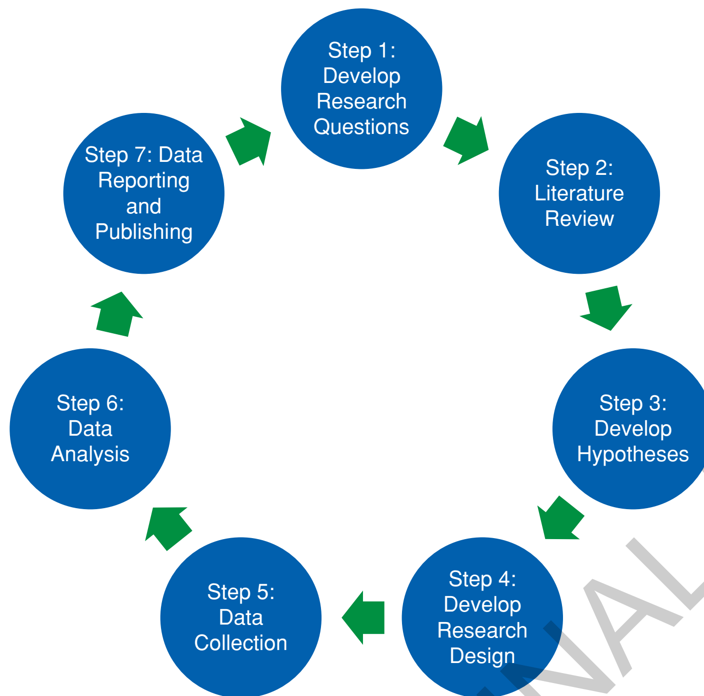
FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Sociological Research Process



local citizens. They target these audiences in an effort to produce change at the local level. Rather than confining their work to academic journals read primarily by other scientists, public sociologists bring their research to everyday people by writing articles for newspapers and magazines, doing interviews with television and radio, participating in local outreach efforts, and attending community meetings.

Regardless of the type of outlet used to disseminate sociological research, communicating findings to a larger audience is an important step in the research process. It ensures continuous dialogue and growth within the field, raises community awareness on social issues, and contributes to cultural change. For all these reasons, sociological research plays a critical role in shaping our social world.

Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the steps we have discussed throughout this chapter, from developing research questions to presenting the results of that research.

CONSIDER THIS...

Newspapers, television, and social media sites can be important sources of sociological knowledge. Can you recall a media story that explicitly mentions sociology? Do you think it is important for media reports to explicitly discuss sociology?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.4

Understanding an Academic Abstract

In this activity, you will learn how to derive information about a sociological study from an abstract.

When researchers publish a sociological study, they almost always include what is called an "abstract," or a very brief summary of the research that is usually only a few hundred words long but conveys quite a bit about the research that has been completed.

Read the following abstract for a sociological journal article:

> This study explores if bystanders to sexual violence are assigned blame when they fail to intervene. During 2017, 31 female and 20 male U.S. college students were asked to read three of six randomly assigned sexual assault vignettes and participate in an interview about their

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perceptions of bystander inaction. Qualitative analyses reveal that college students do hold bystanders accountable for inaction, but the assignment of blame depends upon the bystander's knowledge of the perpetrator's intentions, the degree of similarity between respondents and the bystanders in the vignettes, and the degree to which the bystanders could have behaved differently. Bystanders do face moderate blame for their inaction, this is true in a variety of assault situations, and it suggests bystander training increases perceptions of culpability for non intervention. This information can help campus administrators improve the efficacy of their bystander education programs. (Holtzman, 2020)

Answer the following questions based on the abstract:

1. What sort of theory does the author appear to be using to contextualize the findings?
   a. Functionalism
   b. Conflict
   c. Symbolic interactionism
2. What method of data collection is mentioned in the abstract?
   a. Surveys
   b. Experiments
   c. Interviews
3. Does this appear to be quantitative or qualitative research?
   a. Quantitative
   b. Qualitative
   c. Both quantitative and qualitative
4. What are the key findings of the study? Is there a conclusion? If so, what is it?

Reading Sociological Research

Before we wrap up this chapter, let's take a moment to discuss the parts of an academic journal article. This will help you learn how to read and critique scientific information. Perhaps it will not be surprising to hear that most scientific articles are divided into sections that roughly correspond to the stages of the research process. Articles generally start with a brief Introduction that states the sociologist's research question. This is followed by a review of the literature, a discussion of relevant theory, and often—particularly in deductive work—a statement of the researcher's hypotheses. The Methods section of the paper describes the research subjects, the data collection process, and the kinds of analyses conducted. The Results section outlines the study findings. The Discussion section offers an in-depth discussion of the study's implications, any possible limitations contained in the current research (e.g., the research may not apply to everyone), and future directions for research. If there are alternative interpretations of the researchers' findings, authors often make note of them in the Discussion section, and discuss how future research might clarify which interpretation makes the most sense.

Reading a journal article for the first time can feel a bit daunting, but there are a few things you can do to make the process a bit easier. First, you should recognize that there are two basic kinds of articles—those that are reporting the findings from a quantitative study and those that are reporting the findings from a qualitative study. Quantitative articles typically have many numbers and tables in them. Qualitative articles are mostly textual and often contain a large number of quotes from interviewees but relatively few (if any) tables.

Once you have identified the kind of article you are reading, you can make some strategic decisions about how you engage with each section of the article. For instance, I tell my students that when they are reading quantitative articles, they should read the Introduction and Literature Review closely because those sections contain important background information that will help them contextualize and understand the study's findings. With respect to the Methods section, however, I often tell my students that if they are new to statistical concepts and techniques, they should take what they can from the Methods section but not panic if they encounter unfamiliar words or confusing notation. Similarly, if they find the tables in the Results section confusing, they should focus their efforts on understanding the written description of the results and the summary that will be contained in the Discussion section.

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These are not hard and fast rules on reading quantitative journal articles, but these tips can help ease the anxiety students often feel the first time they open a journal article.

For qualitative articles, though, the reading is a little different. In this case, the Methods section is very important because it explains how the researcher made sense of their textual data. Because qualitative research relies so heavily on a scientist's ability to organize data and recognize the patterns it contains—generally without the assistance of statistics and software packages—assessments about the reliability of their results will often hinge on your understanding of the methods that were employed. Thus, it is important to closely read the Methods sections in qualitative research. Likewise, the Results section is critical because it contains the quotes used to illustrate and give meaning to the research findings. Overall, then, qualitative articles are often slightly longer and more time-intensive to read than quantitative articles, but they also provide us with detailed and in-depth knowledge of social processes and patterns.

Check Your Understanding

1. What kinds of outlets do sociologists use to communicate their research findings?
2. What are the parts of a scientific journal article?
3. What are some strategies for reading sociological research?

CONCLUSION

As you can see, sociological research is the result of a number of interrelated processes, from the application of theory and a review of the literature to data collection, analysis, and the communication of results. Research is one of the most important things a sociologist does because it not only helps us understand our social world, it is also instrumental in helping us change it. Effective social change is based on a number of things, including dedicated people who are willing to pursue a cause, but the roles of data and research in facilitating that process cannot be overstated. In short, by learning how to do research you are, in effect, learning how to change the world!

The remaining chapters in this text will break down the research process in more detail and teach you how to engage in each of these steps. Along the way you will also learn about research ethics, mixed methodologies, and using research to promote social justice. Research is an important aspect of sociology, and although you cannot master the process in a single semester, this text will provide you with foundational knowledge that you can build upon as you continue to grow as a sociology student.

REVIEW

2.1 What are the three major sociological theoretical perspectives, and why is theory important?

There are three prominent theoretical paradigms in sociology—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism is a theoretical perspective that argues that society is composed of interrelated systems that shape and constrain individuals, and in so doing, help create, maintain, and stabilize that society. Conflict theory is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the strife that institutions and social patterns create in society. Finally, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective in which repeated social interactions produce the meanings and hierarchies associated with socially constructed characteristics, events, and identities. Theory is important because it shapes the way sociologists ask questions, interpret data, and come to understand the social world.

2.2 How do sociologists generate research questions?

Sociologists pose empirical (as opposed to non-empirical), inductive, and deductive research questions. Empirical questions are those that you can answer with scientific data; you can use

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the steps of the research process to arrive at an answer to the question. Non-empirical questions cannot be answered scientifically and tend to be more opinion-based. Inductive questions result from specific observations of facts that a researcher thinks might point to a general tendency. Deductive questions start with a theoretical premise that a researcher hopes to verify by examining specific observations in the social world.

2.3 What are key aspects of the sociological research process?

Designing a study that can answer one's research questions is a multistep process. It begins by reviewing what other researchers have written on the topic. This is called a literature review. The next step is to develop a research design. This occurs when sociologists articulate their hypotheses and identify their independent and dependent variables. Sociologists then collect and analyze data from the social world. Collecting data involves gathering information about the social world. Analyzing data refers to making sense of the information that has been gathered. Because theory is the lens through which sociologists make sense of the social world, it is critical for helping sociologists contextualize their research findings.

2.4 How do sociologists communicate their research results, and what are the major parts of a research article?

Sociologists communicate their results to a larger audience through such things as scientific journals, academic conferences, or public engagement via newspaper articles, television interviews, podcasts, blogs, and community outreach events. Most scientific articles are divided into sections that roughly correspond to the stages of the research process. Articles generally start with a brief Introduction that states the sociologist's research question. This is followed by a review of the literature, a discussion of relevant theory, and often—particularly in deductive work—a statement of the researcher's hypotheses. The Methods section of the paper describes the research subjects, the data collection process, and the kinds of analyses conducted. The Results section outlines the study findings. The Discussion section offers an in-depth discussion of the study's implications, any possible limitations contained in the current research (e.g., the research may not apply to everyone), and future directions for research.

KEY TERMS

academic conference presentations
academic journals
analyzing data
applied sociologists (public sociologists)
bourgeoisie
class position
collecting data
conflict theory
deductive questions
dependent variables
empirical questions
functionalism
hypothesis
independent variables
inductive questions
literature review
macro approach
micro approach
non-empirical questions
party position
peer review
proletariat
qualitative methods
quantitative methods
research subjects
social facts
sociological questions
sociological theory
status position
survey
symbolic iinteractionism
theory
variables

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15 TELLING THE STORY: INTERACTING WITH THE COMMUNITIES YOU STUDY

Heather Parrott

STUDENT LEARNING QUESTIONS

1. What is community-based research?
2. What are the main steps in community-based research?
3. What are the unique ethical considerations of community-based research?
4. What are the challenges and opportunities that researchers face when conducting community-based research?

Imagine a group of sociology students studying clients at a local soup kitchen. They descend on the soup kitchen at mealtime, interview people about their life experiences, and then leave to write about it for their class. The students may have broadened their understanding of hunger, poverty, and/or inequality through this experience, but the lives of the study participants have remained unchanged.

The communities near colleges and universities sometimes become social laboratories for sociology professors and students. Their close distance from the university, coupled with their familiarity to students and professors, makes them relatively easy communities to study. In cases where researchers study nearby groups and communities that are socially or financially disadvantaged, the discrepancy between the college or university on the one hand, and the community on the other, can become a source of tension. This is sometimes referred to as the "town–gown divide." In these cases, sociologists may find themselves examining underprivileged populations as privileged outsiders, even as they seek to understand the problems that these communities face and work toward solutions.

The power dynamics in social research have historically been skewed, with the researcher setting the agenda and often benefiting disproportionally from the research (in publications, professional advancement, or even course credit). This chapter explores how researchers can work *with* communities and community organizations on social research so that the process and products can be mutually beneficial.

HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

HEATHER PARROTT

I was drawn to sociology as an undergraduate because it gave me the tools to better understand social problems. I also respected my undergraduate sociology professors who used their academic expertise to address the problems about which they taught; these teachers were actively involved in community agencies as volunteers, board members, and researchers. I followed their examples as activists by working at social services agencies throughout my undergraduate and graduate education, working at a rape crisis center, a group home for abused children, and a domestic violence shelter. When I got to graduate school, I struggled with whether to become an academic or a social worker. I loved sociological teaching and research, but also loved doing hands-on work to help

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people within the community. My academic path as a public sociologist has ultimately allowed me to merge these passions—I teach a wide range of sociology classes (social problems, race and ethnicity, immigration, gendered violence, research methods) and work with social service providers on community-based research, helping them better achieve their missions. Like my undergraduate professors, I incorporate my community work experiences into my teaching to clarify sociological concepts and, I hope, similarly inspire my students to positively impact their communities.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH?

The process of working with community partners on research can be broadly termed **community-based research (CBR)**, and it shares many similarities with what others term *action research, participatory research, participatory action research*, and *feminist action research*. Researchers engaged in community-based research are often called **public sociologists**, a term meant to encompass sociologists who engage with topics of public concern and disseminate findings to a wider, nonacademic audience. Community research can start with a group of community members and academics coming together because of a shared social concern such as water quality, climate change, or affordable housing. In other cases, community research can start as a collaboration between researchers and community agencies, like nonprofit organizations, schools, churches, law enforcement agencies, or even businesses. Community agencies or groups sometimes want to assess the success of their programs or strategies, but do not have adequate resources to collect, analyze, and compile all of the data they believe are necessary. Agencies also often need to collect and analyze data to demonstrate the need for their services and the effectiveness of their programming to potential funders. Sociologists possess the broad methodological toolkit necessary for rigorous and comprehensive evaluations of community organizations and programming. Often, sociologists partnering with community groups offer their services at no or low cost to community groups or agencies.

As a category of sociological research, CBR has three major tenets (Strand et al., 2003):

- The research is a collaboration between academic researchers and community partners; the process is open and democratic.
- The research recognizes multiple sources of knowledge, methods of discovery, and forms of dissemination.
- The research has a goal of social change; this could include larger policy changes or relative minor changes, like changes in how a program operates.

As outlined in Table 15.1, traditional research and CBR differ on many fronts, including goals, roles of the participants, primary beneficiaries, and the means of dissemination. Traditional research revolves around academic expertise and interests, assumes the researcher is the outside expert, community members are subjects, publications are the goal, and results are disseminated in academic publications. CBR, in contrast, stresses collaboration, community needs, and social change. The researchers work with the community to create products that are mutually beneficial.

CONSIDER THIS...

Do you know what are the major challenges facing communities near you? Do you know what organizations are tackling these challenges? If not, how would you find out?

Examples of CBR

Jennifer Cossyleon's research on the interplay between community organizing and family life for Black and Latina women provides an excellent example of CBR. As a sociology graduate student working

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TABLE 15.1 ■ A Comparison of Traditional Academic Research and Community-Based Research

	Traditional Academic Research	Community-Based Research
Primary goal of the research	Advance knowledge within a discipline	Community betterment; social change, social justice
Role of researcher	Outside expert	Collaborator, partner, learner
Role of community	Object to be studied ("community as laboratory")	Collaborator and partner
Role of students	None, or limited to research assistants	Collaborators, partners, learners
Relationship between researcher and participants	Short-term, task-oriented, detached	Long-term, multifaceted, connected
Measure of value of research	Acceptance by academic peers (ex: publications)	Usefulness for community partners, contribution for social change
Primary beneficiaries of the research	Academic researcher	Academic researcher, student, community
Means of dissemination	Written report, academic article, or book	Any and all forms that may have impact

Source: Adapted from Exhibit 1.1 in Community-Based Research and Higher Education, by Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue, 2003.

with the Center for Urban Research and Learning in Chicago, Cossyleon connected with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), a grassroots organization that mobilizes marginalized communities for social change. Cossyleon became actively involved in the agency and focused her dissertation research on women's family-focused community organizing, a "political model that recognizes the inseparability of private and public lives" (Cossyleon, 2018a, 2018b). The community organizing activities were intentionally family-friendly, such as providing free childcare and shared food, and sought to address the daily struggles of these low-income families.

Participating in 90 organizing events totaling over 250 hours, Cossyleon gained the trust of her research participants because she "showed up," became "part of the family," and openly shared her own experiences with them. Using the trust she had built up as a foundation, she interviewed 47 organization participants who, because of her continued participation with the organization, felt more confident that she would accurately relay their stories. Although members of the organization did not contribute directly to Cossyleon's academic writing, she continually discussed research progress with her interviewees, shared drafts with those who were interested, and incorporated participants' feedback. Cossyleon viewed community members as collaborators and respected the valuable insights they provided based on their lived experience and their shared goals of community empowerment.

Community organizing, such as that conducted by COFI, can support social change in underserved communities.

SDI Productions/E+/Getty Images

In Cossyleon's study, and in other community-based research projects, community members have a voice in the research process, they have an ally in their activities, and data collected can be used to further the goals of the organization. This research approach is much different from traditional research that stresses detachment and the expertise of academic researchers.

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Another example of CBR is Michelle Ronda and Robin Isserles's (2018) collaborative project with researchers at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and the Battery Park City Authority (BPCA). The BCPA wanted to better understand the users and types of use of the 36 acres of public parks in Battery Park City. Like many CBR studies, Ronda and Isserles actively incorporated students as research partners in their work. They hired and trained a total of 43 undergraduate student researchers for their year-long project. In addition to training all students on methodology and data collection, Ronda and Isserles trained 18 students to enter data into SPSS, a social science statistical software program.

In total, the research team surveyed 549 randomly selected park visitors; made direct contact with another 2,836 randomly selected visitors; systematically counted over 32,000 visitors in BPC parks; and held seven focus groups with BPC stakeholders in supplemental resources at the end of the chapter). Although the Battery Park City Authority could have hired a marketing firm, which may have completed the work more quickly, the Borough of Manhattan Community College was chosen for this project in part due to the educational component it offered to students. The project resulted in rigorous research and the development of a positive, ongoing university–community collaboration.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 15.1

Developing Questions for Community-Based Research

In this exercise, you will think through sociological research questions that can be addressed though community collaborations.

1. What is a sociological topic you could research using community collaborations?
2. With what community groups, organizations, or agencies could you collaborate to examine this issue?
3. What are two specific research questions you would use for this issue?
4. How might the interests of academic researchers and community organizations affect the research questions they select?

Heather Parrott and Colby Valentine's (2021) research on human trafficking is an additional example of CBR. In 2016, Parrott and Valentine started helping a new community organization—the Empowerment Collaborative of Long Island (ECLI)—collect data about the services they provide to victims of human trafficking. This information was necessary for their fund-raising and grant-writing efforts and, thus, the growth of their agency. More recently, in 2018, Parrott and Valentine helped ECLI and the Suffolk County Police Department secure a 3-year federal grant to start the Suffolk County Trafficking Initiative (SCATI), an anti–human trafficking task force that includes ECLI, the Suffolk County Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), Homeland Security, the sherriff's office, and a number of agencies that work with victims of human trafficking. The researchers run the task force meetings and, as research partners on the grant, are tasked with helping gather information about human trafficking victims and traffickers across agencies. The goals are to better understand and better address the problem of trafficking. While the research is ongoing, the results will be presented in multiple forms to satisfy different audiences, including presentations to the task force, descriptive reports, and academic articles.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is community-based research (CBR)?
2. What are public sociologists?
3. How does CBR differ from traditional research?

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WHAT ARE THE MAIN STEPS IN CBR?

CBR stresses both participation and action. As noted earlier, the researcher works in *partnership* with community partners to answer research questions while bringing about positive social change. Next, we'll discuss essential steps in the CBR process. Although many of these steps mirror the research approach outlined in earlier chapters, CBR requires researchers to consider an additional collaborative layer when designing a project.

Identify the Social Issue or Community Concern

The general research topic for community-based research may come from a variety of sources—a class assignment, a proposed independent study topic, or general interest. In some cases, an agency or community group might reach out directly to explore potential partnerships.

One avenue to starting a CBR project is to see what activities are occurring in the community on a given topic. Researchers can attend public forums, meetings, protests, or other community activities to see with what issues people are engaged, and to identify the main participants. By doing so, researchers can start developing alliances with community members and/or organizations. As these relationships develop, community groups may start discussing their needs with the researcher, and the researcher might discuss their own ideas with community members. Whether the research is researcher-initiated or community-initiated, organizational leaders and other potential gatekeepers should be included in discussions early in the process, as they can provide valuable insight on potential restrictions, needed data, organizational history, and community context.

Identify Stakeholders

Once the research topic is identified, researchers should make a list of stakeholders. **Stakeholders** are individuals, agencies, or community groups that are either affected directly by a social issue and/or have an interest in developing a solution. The researchers often identify a "key group" of stakeholders as well as an "extended group" of stakeholders. **Key stakeholders** are those who deal with the issue most directly and, perhaps, in ways that are most interesting to the researchers. If the researcher is interested in farmworker rights, for example, he or she may want to begin by talking to farmworkers and leaders from farmworker rights groups, before bringing in farmers, law enforcement officials, and politicians. If research discussions start with this smaller key group, development of the research problem will be easier and the direction of the research will likely be better aligned with the interests of the researchers.

The extended group of stakeholders is more tangentially associated with the problem; they have an interest in the problem, but it is not a central concern in their lives or work. For example, a group established around the topic of educational equality would certainly include teachers and parents as key stakeholders, while police officers, employers, and religious leaders may be part of an extended group of stakeholders. The roles of the researchers, key stakeholders, and perhaps even extended stakeholders (depending on their level of involvement) should be clearly laid out in a memorandum of understanding (MOU), as discussed further in the section on ethical considerations later in this chapter.

CONSIDER THIS…

Imagine you were studying the topic of homelessness. Who would you consider key stakeholders? Who would you consider extended stakeholders? Why?

Community Advisory Boards

One unique element of CBR is the potential inclusion of **community advisory boards (CAB)**, or community advisory groups, which are comprised of community members, key stakeholders, and academic researchers (sometimes including students too!). These boards are most prevalent in health-related

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A community advisory board, such as the one seen here, should represent the concerns of the community.

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research (Nyirenda et al., 2018, Strauss et al., 2001) and are established to ensure that research is mutually beneficial, a variety of community voices are heard, diverse constituencies are adequately represented, community members are adequately protected, and there is an ongoing dialogue between researchers and the community. Developing a community advisory board may serve to strengthen community support and trust, especially in communities that have become wary of continually being research "subjects" (Quinn, 2004).

To set up a community advisory board, the researchers must first define who is included in the "community." Is the community the neighborhood, town, or city? Is it more centered around an organization and its client base? The goal is to have a diverse cross-section of the community, however it is defined; thus, it is important to develop procedures for recruiting a representative board and then sharing power across its diverse members. These boards can take on a number of roles, including acting as a liaison between researchers and community, representing community concerns, helping develop research materials (e.g., informed consent forms, interview questions), and providing recommendations for study recruitment (Quinn, 2004, Strauss et al., 2001).

Identify a Collective Problem

In traditional research, the academic researcher sets the research agenda, establishing the research topic, question to be answered, and method for data collection and analysis. In CBR, these are developed collectively. The researcher meets with a core group of stakeholders to determine the most pressing research needs. When researchers really listen to the stakeholders, the research question, and even the topic can sometimes be unexpectedly transformed. The research can take a different direction than the researcher had initially expected, and might also require adjustments to the research team or the stakeholders. For example, a research project on incarceration could unexpectedly end up focusing on inmate literacy, thus benefiting from the inclusion of education researchers and the expansion of community stakeholders to include educators.

Community partners bring valuable information and perspectives, but so do sociologists. Social science researchers can review and summarize existing scholarly research on a topic to determine what is already known, what remains unclear, and what questions have yet to be asked. By compiling this information, sociologists can help community partners understand the work that has already been done on the topic and can give all members of the academic-community team ideas for research. They can also provide a more removed perspective, sometimes allowing them to notice larger trends, ask seemingly naive (but often important!) questions, and uncover unspoken assumptions. Community members can add their expertise by relaying their knowledge of the communities in which they live and work. Their nuanced understandings of the problems facing their communities—as well as community successes—are crucial for asking the correct questions.

Data Collection

The scope of data collection needs for CBR can be very targeted (e.g., evaluating the effectiveness of a specific program) or quite expansive (e.g., assessing food insecurity in a city). There are often multiple research questions to pursue simultaneously, some asked by community partners and some by researchers. The specific methods chosen for CBR should be those that are best able to answer the research question or questions that the collaborators have agreed to investigate. Thus, CBR research is often "mixed methods" research, drawing from multiple methods like surveys and qualitative interviews, in the course of a single project.

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Researchers and community partners should be sure that the research goals of all partners are met without making the research process too intense or time consuming for either the organization or those researched. This can be challenging, as Parrott and Valentine (2021) discovered in their collaborative research on the relationship between treatment and health outcomes for trauma victims. Parrott and Valentine worked to develop a survey with a nonprofit agency and a multidisciplinary academic research team, but found that the desire to satisfy all stakeholder interests resulted in a very lengthy survey. Victim advocates were interested in getting more information about such things as health, history of abuse, current substance abuse, and depression indicators, while the diverse group of academics wanted to include broader questions related to sociology, criminology, and social work. In the end, a surprisingly low proportion of respondents completed the survey, and the researchers speculated that this was at least partially due to the length of the survey. Thus, although a strength of community partnerships is that they can generate numerous questions and ideas, the process of prioritizing these questions and ideas in a way that is fair to all involved can be a challenge.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 15.2

Contemplating an on-Campus CBR Project

In this exercise, you will think through how you could conduct CBR on your campus.

Identify an issue that affects your campus community, *or* a hypothetical change that *could* affect your campus community. This could be something challenging, like campus sexual assault or binge drinking, or something more modest, like the introduction of new types of food in the campus dining hall.

1. What is an issue currently affecting or that could affect your campus community? How would you study this change using a community-based research approach?
2. Who are the stakeholders?
3. What is your research question?
4. What methods would you use to answer the research question?

Data Interpretation

Ideally, the interpretation of data is also a collaborative process. Researchers often present their initial findings to community partners through written drafts, informal presentations, or public forums. Researchers and community members may then work together to interpret the findings or give feedback on the existing interpretations. In cases where interpretations differ, the researcher and community partners may choose to collect more data, come to a consensus on how to present the interpretation of the findings, or present multiple interpretations of data within reports.

Muslim high school students from Detroit, seen here visiting Republican state senator Ken Horn, take part in the annual Michigan Muslim Capitol Day to discuss issues that concerned them. This is an example of a community coalition.

Jim West/Alamy Stock Photo

Share Results

Researchers can share their results in class presentations, conference presentations, and academic publications. Community partners can decide how they would like the results shared, such as through yearly organizational reports, grant documents, staff meetings, community presentations, websites, handouts, or films. The format depends on the scope of the research, desired outcomes for all partners, and the nature of the research question and findings. More favorable or surprising findings are likely to be more widely shared.

There are likely to be multiple ways of presenting data outcomes in CBR to satisfy the multiple interests

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of the diverse research team. First, the academics involved in the research are likely to want more formal academic presentations, papers, or books from the research. These products are generally geared toward an academic audience, which may include a more thorough review of the academic literature, links to theory, and more sophisticated quantitative analyses of data. Such final products may be interesting to community partners, but these products are often more detailed and take more time to come to fruition than is needed and desired.

Community partners often need more basic data that can be produced more quickly and easily disseminated. They may want basic descriptive data to show their activities, the success of their endeavors, or the extent of a social problem. These data may be required for applying for grants, completing organizational reports, fund-raising, trying to improve organizational function, or garnering community support. Many grants require organizations to submit data reports mere weeks after the completion of data collection—a much more rapid turnaround time than typical academic research. Helping agencies collect and analyze data and summarize the results in reports is part of giving back to community partners, and is an important step to bridge the divide between academia and the community.

Beyond reports, the products of CBR can be distributed in any number of forms, including public forums, informal community settings, flyers, art, and media. Some academics and organizations effectively disseminate information and findings to the larger community through websites and films. Films can let communities know about a social problem (e.g., environmental or health issues) and available services (e.g., support groups, health centers, or outreach programs), and researchers can even measure the impact of these films on the community of interest. For example, a collection of academic researchers, medical professionals, public health advocates, and community members in South Carolina worked with University of South Carolina filmmakers to create a film about (1) the problems of access to healthy food and the related rise of obesity in the Orangeburg area and (2) the formation and implementation of a farmer's market in the area. The research team used the film to disseminate information about the problem and possible solution, and then measured the effectiveness of the film (Brandt et al., 2016).

Develop an Agenda for Action

After the study is completed and the results shared, researchers work with community partners to develop an **agenda for action**, a plan for implementing the lessons learned from CBR. The agenda for action could entail such steps as creating new programs, changing existing programs, expanding services, partnering with other agencies, hiring additional staff members, applying for a new funding source, or starting a new research project. When developing a plan for action, researchers can collaborate with community members to translate research results into more tangible plans. Researchers can make suggestions based on the data collected, but this final stage of the CBR is more firmly in the hands of community partners and organizations. Organizations have to consider such things as resources, organizational networks, political climate, and community support when setting a data-driven agenda. Power certainly comes into play at this stage as well, as certain stakeholders may be more resistant to change than others, especially if the changes result in diminished power, less money, or increased public scrutiny.

Check Your Understanding

1. What are the steps of CBR research?
2. How does the collaborative process of CBR make this research different from typical research?
3. What are community advisory boards/committees?
4. In what ways may researchers and community partners share their research findings?

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WHAT ARE THE UNIQUE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH?

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) limits the collection and sharing of private patient data.

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Ethical considerations are central in any research project, but community-based research has some unique considerations. First and foremost, everyone involved in the research needs to understand and respect the importance of confidentiality. If community organizations are involved in the research, researchers and collaborators must formulate a plan to protect individual research subjects as well as the organizations, including all clients, staff, and organizational records. Community organizations may also be bound by certain legal restrictions (like the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA) and bureaucratic restrictions (e.g., nonprofit or corporate bylaws), which may limit the collection and sharing of data. It is crucial to understand these ethical considerations and restrictions from the start of the project and to remember them throughout.

Power and control are key ethical issues to consider when conducting any social research. Think back to the "town–gown divide" mentioned earlier in the chapter. Historically, social scientists often treated communities as if they were laboratories for the study of social problems. Researchers would determine which questions to ask, the best methods for answering them, how to interpret the data, and where to disseminate the results. Community members, particularly when they were economically and politically disadvantaged, had little influence over the research taking place, and even less influence on how they themselves were represented in resulting publications. In many ways, the unequal power dynamics between the researcher and the communities they were studying reproduced, rather than challenged, social inequalities.

CONSIDER THIS...

What are some sources of potential tension between academic researchers and community partners? Why?

Community-based researchers are not only attentive to unequal power relations, but address them head-on. Throughout the research process, they ask, "Who benefits? And how much?" Conducting research benefits the careers of academics, because research can yield scholarly publications, grants, and professional advancement. Community partners may have a different perspective regarding what is valuable to them. Ideally, the data collected in the course of CBR should be equally beneficial to the community partner and the researcher. For instance, the community may want to use findings to support grant applications, to include in yearly reports, or to evaluate a particular program, proposed law, or other type of intervention. Community partners often want to collect data in order to address a pressing community concern or even a crisis, so the applicability of data to their needs is of paramount importance. It is often necessary to explore and articulate the expectations of different stakeholders by writing them out.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 15.3

Considering Issues of Power in CBR

In this activity, you will think through the role of power in a CBR scenario.

A researcher is interested in better understanding what services are most effective for helping domestic violence victims. The researcher invites a diverse set of stakeholders to discuss the issue, including people from the local police department, child protective service workers, the director of

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the local domestic violence shelter, a couple of case managers from the domestic violence shelter, and several domestic violence survivors who used to receive services at the shelter. They come together to discuss potential research topics.

Based on this scenario, write your answers to the following questions:

1 How would you define power in this scenario?

2 How might differences in power affect this discussion and decision making?

3 How could you minimize these differences and their effects on the research process?

When working with community partners, the best strategy is to develop a **memorandum of understanding (MOU)** as early as possible. An MOU is a non–legally binding document that clearly lays out expectations and protections for all parties involved in the research (see example in Figure 15.1). The following questions should be addressed in the process of drawing up the MOU:

- How will data be collected and analyzed? What will be required of the community organization?
- What is the proposed time frame for the research? When should the community partners expect results to be available to them?
- How will the researchers share the data with the community or organization? Will they provide a written report or a presentation of the findings? How will the findings be shared with the wider community?
- Does the researcher anticipate using the findings for academic publications and presentations? If so, what protections (such as pseudonyms) will be in place to protect the organization, clients, staff, or respondents?
- Although it can sometimes feel awkward to talk about the academic use of data, being up-front with organizational leaders is best because it gives them an opportunity to decide whether they are comfortable with all aspects of the collaboration. To the extent that they are uncomfortable, it provides an opportunity for collaborators to discuss more suitable alternatives. Many organizations expect this arrangement when working with academics, and may even enjoy playing a role in producing scholarly knowledge.

As part of the MOU, the researcher may promise that the agency can review all materials before they are published or presented. When this occurs, the agency has a chance to make sure that all data are presented in ways that protect clients, staff, and the organization. The agency representatives can ask the researcher to alter anything that they do not feel is adequately protective. It is important to note that although this section of the MOU addresses confidentiality, it does not lay out a plan for potential differences in agreement about study findings. Tactics to address such discrepancies are discussed later in this chapter. Community advisory boards can certainly play a role in ensuring that adequate steps are taken to protect confidentiality as well, and may help craft MOUs between researchers and community members.

Check Your Understanding

1. What are some ethical considerations in CBR?
2. What is a memorandum of understanding (MOU)?
3. What questions are addressed in an MOU?
4. Why is an MOU important?

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FIGURE 15.1 ■ Example of a Memorandum of Understanding

Memorandum of Understanding Between <<insert community organization>> and Dr. Heather Macpherson Parrott, Long Island University

THIS AGREEMENT constitutes a contract between <<insert community organization>> and Dr. Heather Parrott of Long Island University. The parties in this agreement have agreed to work to engage in the sharing of data for analysis purposes and reports, as well as relevant publications that further the body of scientific knowledge available to researchers and practitioners.

SECTION 1. PURPOSE

The primary basis of this agreement is to engage in the sharing of data for analysis purposes and reports, as well as relevant publications that further the body of scientific knowledge available to researchers and practitioners. This will be done through the collection and/or sharing of quantitative and qualitative data through <<insert community organization>>, which will be used to conduct research on various issues related to health, trauma, victim recovery, and/or organizational effectiveness.

SECTION II. ASSURANCES <<insert community organization>>

- <<Insert community organization>> will provide data or assist in the collection of data for mutually agreed upon topics of inquiry.

SECTION III. ASSURANCES Dr. Heather Macpherson Parrott

- Confidentiality Agreement
- Dr. Heather Parrott will keep confidential any personally identifying information about <<insert community organization>> clients, former clients, staff, or volunteers.
- No <<insert community organization>> materials, with or without personally identifying information, may be removed from <<insert community organization>> premises without explicit permission of <<insert community organization>> personnel.
- All <<insert community organization>> data will have all personally identifying information (i.e., name, address, phone number) removed from the data before it is removed from <<insert community organization>> premises.
- Data will not be shared with any other researcher prior to such other researcher having executed a confidentially agreement with <<insert community organization> and << insert community organization>> Executive Director having agreed to their participation in the research project.
- Dr. Heather Parrott will be responsible for (a) discussing the proposed inclusion of any other researchers with <<insert community organization>> Executive Director and (b) procuring a signed confidentiality agreement from each agreed upon additional researcher.
- At least fifteen (15) days prior to releasing any manuscript, report, or web site universal resource locator (URL) intended for public dissemination that contains <<insert community organization>> data, I agree to provide the Executive Director of <<insert community organization>> with a copy of the manuscript, report, or the URL. If the Executive Director of <<insert community organization>> determines that the manuscript, report, or web site violates confidentiality, I shall modify the report prior to its release to protect against such identification.
- The researcher(s) affiliated with Long Island University will produce reports for <<insert community organization>> on each agreed upon topic of inquiry.

____

Dr. Heather Parrott   Executive Director

__________________ ___________________

Date   Date

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

CHRISTINA JACKSON

I consider myself to be a public sociologist and a scholar–activist—meaning that I bring together my academic work and organizing work to produce knowledge that is public and accessible. For me, being a public sociologist and scholar–activist is about using the disciplinary skills of sociology to promote the public good.

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Courtesy of Christina Jackson

I teach sociology and anthropology students to *learn as they do* while taking into account their own story. This combined concept called for the creation of a *scholar–activist approach* to engaging in projects with the community that are *decolonial*, and which lead to uprooting structures of inequality already in place. A *decolonial* framework to community work promotes solidarity, mutual relationships, accountability, public participation, and decision making when engaging with more powerful or elite institutions. I believe in helping communities most impacted organize themselves while also placing their perspective at the forefront of the creation of academic knowledge.

As a method, ethnography is a natural fit for this kind of community work. *Ethnography* has provided a bridge between my organizing world and my academic world in ways that contribute positively in aiding communities in answering our society's most pressing questions. In the classes I teach, as well as in the ethnographic research I conduct, we use our skills to explore and document the lives of those studied, but also learn their perspectives and help them achieve community goals. In the process, my students develop communication skills, critical thinking, and perspective-taking.

In 2016, I began to develop a rapport with Black Lives Matter Atlantic City (BLMAC), who wanted to put their realities in a larger context of racial inequality, and asked for help putting on a year-long series of educational forums on a variety of topics including race, sexuality, family, health, and violence. In addition to providing academic expertise, I built coalitions within Atlantic City communities and connected like-minded organizations to form community panels. My students and I conducted interviews with BLM members in order to archive their experiences and blog about their perspectives.

In 2017, I started working with an organization called New Jersey Organizing Project (NJOP) through a connection with our university's service-learning program. The mutual goal was to collect more data about the lives of victims of Hurricane Sandy 5 years later and learn about the effect of hurricanes on the lives of residents in South Jersey. We trained sociology students in data collection methods so that they could canvas the victims and record the experiences of the recovery. Our data collection efforts culminated in a large report that helped victims in their efforts to demand more resources from the New Jersey state government. The state recently announced an addition of $100 million for disaster aid to help the families still not home yet after 6½ years.

Projects like this allow sociologists to learn as they do while contributing to the public good of the communities in which we live and work. Our sociology skills can be put to the test while reducing inequality and building community power.

Christina Jackson is an associate professor of sociology and former faculty fellow at the Stockton Center for Community Engagement at Stockton University.

Discussion Question

What elements of community-based research are evident in Professor Jackson's description of her project?

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES INVOLVED IN CBR?

Establishing social change–oriented research relationships with community organizations presents unique opportunities and challenges. Understanding these opportunities and challenges before the project begins, making plans to maximize the benefits, and seeking to avoid or navigate successfully through the challenges help to ensure a successful partnership.

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Challenges

Sharing Power

Balancing differences in perspectives and power is a significant challenge in community-based research. Oftentimes community members will have more practical knowledge and first-hand experience with the issue, while researchers have more scholarly knowledge of the issue and greater methodological expertise. In all cases, researchers benefit when they clearly respect the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of practitioners, victims, and other stakeholders. Researchers must also take into account differences in power within organizations (e.g., an executive director vs. an intern) as well as between organizations (e.g., a local police department vs. the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]).

Ideally, all parties should feel comfortable speaking, and all should feel that their viewpoints are valued. For example, an employee at a rape crisis center may have ideas on how to better provide services to victims of sexual assault, but may feel hesitant to share these ideas in front of the executive director for fear that this will affect their employment. Researchers must consider a range of potential power structures, including race, ethnicity, language, gender, and social prestige, along with workplace hierarchies. It is important for researchers to consider how these different power structures create vulnerabilities for individuals, and may also affect the dynamics of the research process.

Ethical Considerations

When researchers start CBR, they typically do not know the exact direction of the research. This presents complications for securing appropriate institutional review board (IRB) approval. As you learned in Chapter 4, an IRB is an entity within a college or university that is tasked with providing ethical oversight on research projects, to make sure that human participants are protected from harm. IRB oversight requires extensive documentation of the research questions, protocols, consent forms, and MOUs with all organizations. Once the researcher and community partners agree on the terms of the research, securing IRB approval can significantly stall the research process. Community partners are sometimes unfamiliar with IRBs, and may not initially understand their importance. In these cases, researchers should explain the importance of institutional oversight for protecting research participants, including the community members and organizations involved in the research project.

Timeline

A significant consideration in CBR, especially when trying to arrange semester- or year-long projects, is that community organizations do not work on an academic timeline. Employees of community organizations may not have time to invest in research during the desired time frame. Alternatively, the community partner's need for research findings may be much more immediate, such as when a grant is due soon, or an upcoming public forum is scheduled. Academic researchers may find it challenging to maintain the necessary scientific rigor of their research while trying to move quickly to solve a problem or meet an external deadline. All partners should be up-front about timelines at the beginning of the research process.

CONSIDER THIS…

You partner with a local elementary school to collect data for it that can be used for your senior thesis. What are some things you should know from, or share with, your school research partners at the beginning of the research process?

Community Partner Commitment

CBR obviously requires the commitment of community partners. The knowledge, time, resources, and people-power that an organization can dedicate to a research project are referred to as organizational **capacity**. Community organizations often lack the capacity to carry out a full-scale research project

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Your professor may have experience working with community partners, and can support you as you conduct CBR.

Klaus Vedfelt/DigitalVision/Getty Images

on their own, because they lack sufficient resources and are busy addressing community needs. Ideally, the CBR should represent a genuine collaboration between academic researchers and community partners, making the most of everyone's skills, knowledge, and perspective, without unreasonable demands of time and other resources.

If you are conducting CBR as a student, there are some best practices to keep in mind when coordinating with a community partner. First, remember that you are a representative of your class and university. Communicate professionally, attend all meetings and arrive to them on time, adhere to agreed-upon deadlines, and treat all research partners and participants with respect. Second, be respectful of the time of your community partners. The community partners are dedicating significant time and energy to working with you, so be sure that you dedicate time to the research and to creating a polished final product. If you are working as a student research team, designate one person as the liaison between community partners and student researchers. This helps to ensure that community partners are not answering the same questions multiple times to different team members. Finally, recognize that CBR can be unpredictable and that you may need help navigating those challenges. Do not be afraid to ask your professor for help if problems or questions transpire. Working through problems is part of the learning experience, and your professor can help you address issues in ways that preserve the university–community partnership.

Academic Research

Community partners may have very specific research needs that are limited in scope, such as evaluating a certain program. Although a narrowly focused study can be very useful for an organization, the limited scope may also constrain outlets for academic research. Throughout the process of CBR, academics should continually consider the suitability of the research project for academic publication and how research plans can be modified to meet the requirements of scholarly research. Such long-term planning can be challenging amidst thinking about more immediate, practical community concerns.

Opportunities

Social Change

For sociologists who are looking to make a difference in the world and to promote social justice, CBR provides an opportunity to do just that. Many researchers like to use their research skills in ways that help an organization or community to address a problem. Unlike many traditional research methods, which seek to maintain distance between the researcher and researched, CBR has the explicit goals of community engagement and social change. With CBR, researchers can use their skills to produce rigorous research and spur data-driven change.

Community Organizing Skills

Community organizing is the coordination of community members to promote community interests. Community organizers leading these efforts need to be able to mobilize diverse groups, effectively negotiate group power dynamics, and communicate well with a variety of individuals, including disenfranchised community residents, activists, and politicians. These skills can be developed through participation in CBR. Community-based researchers develop these leadership and communication skills as they partner with communities to decide what problems to explore, develop research plans, talk through results, and develop plans of action.

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Résumé Building

Working with community organizations for social research is excellent experience to add to a résumé, especially as a student. Undergraduate sociology students often pursue careers in law, social work, health, education, and community organizations. The process of collaborating in social research projects with community partners gives students concrete skills and experiences like synthesizing research, designing surveys, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and communicating with diverse audiences. Not only do these skills look good on résumés, but they also set students up for success in graduate school and in their careers.

Just as translators must understand the nuances and interplay of culture and language, researchers must understand the unique qualities of the people and communities they study.

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Cultural Competence

Conducting social research in a community setting can also be an opportunity to develop cultural competence. **Cultural competence** refers to the knowledge, skills, and experiences that people or organizations have that enable them to practice culturally sensitive behaviors, attitudes, and policies. Cultural competence includes a range of social and cognitive skills, including valuing diversity, recognizing complexity in language interpretation, managing differences in power, working with the community to define and address their needs, and adapting to the cultural contexts of the communities researchers study. Cultural competence helps people to work more effectively with people from diverse life backgrounds who may have different experiences and perspectives.

An important aspect of cultural competence is that it centralizes issues of power and inequality without "othering" impoverished, minority, or foreign communities. Othering refers to seeing others as different than or less than oneself; the marginalization of these groups is implied, as they are compared to a white, middle-class, and American default standard (Pon, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007). Concern over power relationships is a common element of both cultural competence and cultural humility. **Cultural humility** is an approach to community work and research that emphasizes an awareness of power imbalances, self-reflection, and supportive interactions (Danso, 2018; Foronda et al., 2016). These practices demonstrate respect for the community members and tend to result in better outcomes, whether for research, social service, or public health initiatives (Nassar-McMillan, 2014; Sousa & Almeida, 2016).

Unique Data

Collecting data with community organizations generates unique data for potential academic publication or grant writing. In some cases, data can be aggregated across multiple research sites, or linked to existing national-level data. In all cases, data from CBR provide new information about the workings of a particular group, organization, or community and a window into how that group, organization, or community fits into a larger social context. Even when the findings are particular to a specific organization, group, or community, they can be used to generate insights and hypotheses for larger-scale studies. In addition, they can provide valuable information for grants, which can be valuable for community organizations and for academic researchers.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 15.4

Rethinking Research

In this exercise, you will think through a variety of ways to work with community partners on research.

Think again about the class research example discussed at the opening of the chapter:

Imagine a group of sociology students studying clients at a local soup kitchen. They descend on the soup kitchen at mealtime, interview people about their life experiences, and then leave to write about it for

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their class. The students may have broadened their understanding of hunger, poverty, and/or inequality through this experience, but the lives of the study participants have remained unchanged.

How could this research be approached differently? To answer this question, write your responses to the following:

1. Outline how a class could research this population using the CBR approach discussed in this chapter.
2. Short of a comprehensive CBR approach, make a list of smaller ways this research could be done more sensitively and collaboratively.

Check Your Understanding

1. What are the challenges involved in CBR for community partners?
2. What are the challenges involved in CBR for academic researchers?
3. What are the best strategies for participating in CBR for students?
4. What opportunities does CBR offer researchers?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the main components, ethical issues, methods, challenges, and opportunities of CBR, a collaborative and social change–oriented approach to research. However, it is worth noting that there is really a continuum between traditional academic research and the CBR approach described in this chapter. A large portion of social science research falls somewhere in the middle. Researchers working in community settings can consider components of this approach even when their method generally falls outside of a CBR approach. For example, researchers can consider the extent to which they integrate community knowledge, incorporate cultural competence, work *with* community members to identify research problems, strive for social change, or help disseminate the results within the wider community. Integrating the themes of community-based research and treating community members as research partners, as opposed to simply research subjects, can result in strong university–community relationships, informed analyses of community issues, and increased potential for meaningful social change.

REVIEW

15.1 What is community-based research?

Community-based research is collaborative research between academic researchers and community partners that has the goal of social change. The researchers work with community members to develop research plans, interpret data, and disseminate results.

15.2 What are the main steps in community-based research?

The first step is to identify a community concern. The second step is to identify stakeholders. The third step is to create a community advisory board. Utilizing feedback from the stakeholders and community advisory board, the next step is to identify a collective problem. Once this problem has been identified, a plan for data collection must be put in place, followed by data interpretation. The final steps are to share the results and to develop a plan for action.

15.3 What are the unique ethical considerations of community-based research?

Researchers in CBR must consider issues of confidentiality and power, looking out for all individuals and organizations involved in the research. Memoranda of understanding can help outline all expectations and protections, negotiating potential problems early in the research process.

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15.4 What are the challenges and opportunities that researchers face when conducting community-based research?

CBR can provide opportunities for contributing to social change, acquiring community organizing skills, résumé building, collecting unique data, and developing cultural competence. Some challenges to CBR are learning to share power, navigating the IRB process, negotiating time restrictions, avoiding overburdening community partners, and carving out opportunities for academic research. Researchers working in community settings can increase the extent to which they integrate community knowledge, incorporate cultural competence, work *with* community members to identify research problems, strive for social change, or help disseminate the results within the wider community.

KEY TERMS

agenda for action
capacity
community advisory boards (CAB)
community organizing
community-based research (CBR)
cultural competence
cultural humility
key stakeholders
memorandum of understanding (MOU)
public sociologists
stakeholders

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