SOC 302: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

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SOC 302: Introduction to Social Research Methods (Ninh)

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Glossary

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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1.1: Introduction

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1.1.1: How Do We Know What We Know?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define research methods.
- Identify and describe the various ways of knowing presented in this section.
- Understand the weaknesses of nonsystematic ways of knowing.
- Define ontology and epistemology and explain the difference between the two.

If I told you that the world is flat, I'm hoping you would know that I'm wrong. But *how* do you know that I'm wrong? And why did people once believe that they *knew* that the world was flat? Presumably the shape of the earth did not change dramatically in the time that we went from "knowing" one thing about it to knowing the other; however, something certainly changed our minds. Understanding both what changed our minds (science) and how might tell us a lot about what we know, what we think we know, and what we think we can know.

This book is dedicated to understanding exactly how it is that we know what we know. More specifically, we will examine the ways that sociologists come to know social facts. Our focus will be on one particular way of knowing: social scientific **research methods**. Research methods are a systematic process of inquiry applied to learn something about our social world. But before we take a closer look at research methods, let's consider some of our other sources of knowledge.

Different Sources of Knowledge

What do you know about only children? Culturally, our stereotype of children without siblings is that they grow up to be rather spoiled and unpleasant. We might think that the social skills of only children will not be as well developed as those of people who were reared with siblings. However, sociological research shows that children who grow up without siblings are no worse off than their counterparts with siblings when it comes to developing good social skills (Bobbitt-Zeher & Downey, 2010).Bobbitt-Zeher, D., & Downey, D. B. (2010). *Good for nothing? Number of siblings and friendship nominations among adolescents.* Presented at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, GA. Sociologists consider precisely these types of assumptions that we take for granted when applying research methods in their investigations. Sometimes we find that our assumptions are correct. Often as in this case, we learn that the thing that everyone seems to know to be true isn't so true after all.The findings from the Bobbit-Zeher and Downey study were featured in a number of news articles in 2010. For one such example, see the following article: Mozes, A. (2010). Being an only child won't harm social skills. *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/parenting-family/2010-08-19-only-child_N.htm

Many people seem to know things without having a background in sociology. Of course, they may have been trained in other social science disciplines or in the natural sciences, or perhaps they read about findings from scientific research. However, there are ways we know things that don't involve scientific research methods. Some people know things through experiences they've had, but they may not think about those experiences systematically; others believe they know things based on selective observation or overgeneralization; still others may assume that what they've always known to be true is true simply *because* they've always known it to be true. Let's consider some of these alternative ways of knowing before focusing on sociology's way of knowing.

Many of us know things simply because we've experienced them directly. For example, you would know that electric fences can be pretty dangerous and painful if you touched one while standing in a puddle of water. We all probably have times we can recall when we learned something because we experienced it. If you grew up in Minnesota, you would observe plenty of kids learn each winter that it really is true that one's tongue will stick to metal if it's very cold outside. Similarly, if you passed a police officer on a two-lane highway while driving 20 miles over the speed limit, you would probably learn that that's a good way to earn a traffic ticket. So direct experience may get us accurate information but only if we're lucky (or unlucky, as in the examples provided here). In each of these instances, the observation process isn't really deliberate or formal. Instead, you would come to know what you believe to be true through **informal observation**. The problem with informal observation is that sometimes it is right, and sometimes it is wrong. And without any systematic process for observing or assessing the accuracy of our observations, we can never *really* be sure that our informal observations are accurate.

Suppose a friend of yours declared that "all men lie all the time" shortly after she'd learned that her boyfriend had told her a fib. The fact that one man happened to lie to her in one instance came to represent all experiences with all men. But do *all* men really lie *all* the time? Probably not. If you prompted your friend to think more broadly about her experiences with men, she would probably acknowledge that she knew many men who, to her knowledge, had never lied to her and that even her boyfriend didn't

generally make a habit of lying. This friend committed what social scientists refer to as **selective observation** by noticing only the pattern that she wanted to find at the time. If, on the other hand, your friend's experience with her boyfriend had been her *only* experience with any man, then she would have been committing what social scientists refer to as **overgeneralization**, assuming that broad patterns exist based on very limited observations.

Another way that people claim to know what they know is by looking to what they've always known to be true. There's an urban legend about a woman who for years used to cut both ends off of a ham before putting it in the oven (Mikkelson & Mikkelson, 2005).Mikkelson, B., & Mikkelson, D. P. (2005). Grandma's cooking secret. Retrieved from http://www.snopes.com/weddings/newlywed/secret.asp She baked ham that way because that's the way her mother did it, so clearly that was the way it was *supposed* to be done. Her mother was the authority, after all. After years of tossing cuts of perfectly good ham into the trash, however, she learned that the only reason her mother ever cut the ends off ham before cooking it was that she didn't have a pan large enough to accommodate the ham without trimming it.

Without questioning what we think we know to be true, we may wind up believing things that are actually false. This is most likely to occur when an **authority** tells us that something is so (Adler & Clark, 2011).The definition for authority provided here comes from the following source: Adler, E. S., & Clark, R. (2011). *An invitation to social research: How it's done*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Our mothers aren't the only possible authorities we might rely on as sources of knowledge. Other common authorities we might rely on in this way are the government, our schools and teachers, and our churches and ministers. Although it is understandable that someone might believe something to be true because someone he or she looks up to or respects has said it is so, this way of knowing differs from the sociological way of knowing, which is our focus in this text.

As a science, sociology relies on a systematic process of inquiry for gaining knowledge. That process, as noted earlier, is called research methods. We'll discuss that process in more detail later in this chapter and throughout the text. For now, simply keep in mind that it is this source of knowledge on which sociologists rely most heavily.

Table 1.1.1.1:Several Different Ways of Knowing

Way of knowing	Description
Informal observation	Occurs when we make observations without any systematic process for observing or assessing accuracy of what we observed.
Selective observation	Occurs when we see only those patterns that we want to see or when we assume that only the patterns we have experienced directly exist.
Overgeneralization	Occurs when we assume that broad patterns exist even when our observations have been limited.
Authority	A socially defined source of knowledge that might shape our beliefs about what is true and what is not true.
Research methods	An organized, logical way of learning and knowing about our social world.

In sum, there are many ways that people come to know what they know. These include informal observation, selective observation, overgeneralization, authority, and research methods. Table 1.1.1.1 "Several Different Ways of Knowing" summarizes each of the ways of knowing described here. Of course, some of these ways of knowing are more reliable than others. Being aware of our sources of knowledge helps us evaluate the trustworthiness of specific bits of knowledge we may hold.

Ontology and Epistemology

Thinking about what you know and how you know what you know involves questions of ontology and epistemology. Perhaps you've heard these terms before in a philosophy class; however, they are relevant to the work of sociologists as well. As we sociologists begin to think about finding something out about our social world, we are probably starting from some understanding of what "is," what can be known about what is, and what the best mechanism happens to be for learning about what is.

Ontology deals with the first part of these sorts of questions. It refers to one's analytic philosophy of the nature of reality. In sociology, a researcher's ontological position might shape the sorts of research questions he or she asks and how those questions are posed. Some sociologists take the position that reality is in the eye of the beholder and that our job is to understand others' view

of reality. Other sociologists feel that, while people may differ in their perception of reality, there is only one *true* reality. These sociologists are likely to aim to discover that true reality in their research rather than discovering a variety of realities.

Like ontology, **epistemology** has to do with knowledge. But rather than dealing with questions about what is, epistemology deals with questions of *how* we know what is. In sociology, there are a number of ways to uncover knowledge. We might interview people to understand public opinion about some topic, or perhaps we'll observe them in their natural environment. We could avoid face-to-face interaction altogether by mailing people surveys for them to complete on their own or by reading what people have to say about their opinions in newspaper editorials. All these are ways that sociologists gain knowledge. Each method of data collection comes with its own set of epistemological assumptions about how to find things out. We'll talk in more depth about these ways of knowing in Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis", our chapters on data collection.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are several different ways that we know what we know, including informal observation, selective observation, overgeneralization, authority, and research methods.
- Research methods are a much more reliable source of knowledge than most of our other ways of knowing.
- A person's ontological perspective shapes her or his beliefs about the nature of reality, or what "is."
- A person's epistemological perspective shapes her or his beliefs about how we know what we know, and the best way(s) to uncover knowledge.

EXERCISES

1. Think about a time in the past when you made a bad decision (e.g., wore the wrong shoes for hiking, dated the wrong person, chose not to study for an exam, dyed your hair green). What caused you to make this decision? How did any of the ways of knowing described previously contribute to your error-prone decision-making process? How might sociological research methods help you overcome the possibility of committing such errors in the future?
2. Feeling unclear about ontology, epistemology, what is, what we can know, and how we know what we can know? This video may help, or it may not. But it addresses some of these questions, and it's hilarious. I highly recommend it: http://www.rocketboom.com/rb_08_jun_04/.

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1.1.2: Science, Social Science, and Sociology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define science.
2. Describe what the phrase “sociology is a social science” means.
3. Describe the specific considerations of which social scientists should be aware.

In Section 1.1.1 "How Do We Know What We Know?", we considered a variety of ways of knowing and the philosophy of knowing. But this is a sociology text rather than a philosophy text. And sociology is a science, or more specifically a social science. In this section, we’ll take a closer look at the science of sociology and some specific considerations of which sociological researchers must be aware.

The Science of Sociology

The sources of knowledge we discussed in Section 1.1.1 "How Do We Know What We Know?" could have been labeled sources of *belief*. In sociology, however, our aim is to discover knowledge. Because sociology is a **science**, while we may examine beliefs in order to understand what they are and where they come from, ultimately we aim to contribute to and enhance knowledge. Science is a particular way of knowing that attempts to systematically collect and categorize facts or truths. A key word here is *systematically*; conducting science is a deliberate process. Unlike the ways of knowing described in Section 1.1.1 "How Do We Know What We Know?", scientists gather information about facts in a way that is organized and intentional and usually follows a set of predetermined steps.

More specifically, sociology is a *social* science. In other words, sociology uses organized and intentional procedures to uncover facts or truths about society. As you probably recall from your introductory sociology class, **sociology** is the scientific study of humans in groups. Sociologists study how individuals shape, are shaped by, and create and maintain their social groups. The groups that sociologists study may be as small as individual families or couples or as large as whole nations. The main point, however, is that sociologists study human beings in relation to one another. In Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory", we’ll explore how variations within sociology such as theoretical perspective may shape a researcher’s approach. For now the important thing to remember is what makes up sociology as a whole. Two key elements are its focus on human social behavior and its scientific approach toward understanding that behavior.

A *New Yorker* cartoon once portrayed a little boy looking up at his father while the father tells him, “I’m a social scientist, Michael. That means I can’t explain electricity or anything like that, but if you ever want to know about people I’m your man” (http://www.cartoonbank.com/1986/im-a-social-scientist-michael-that-means-i-cant-explain-electricity-or-anything-like-that-/invt/116658). As the cartoon implies, sociologists aim to understand people. And while the cartoon may also imply that sociologists don’t have much to contribute that will be of interest to others, hopefully you will be convinced this is not the case by the time you finish this text. But first, let’s move on to a few specific considerations of which all social scientists should be aware.

Specific Considerations for the Social Sciences

One of the first and most important things to keep in mind about sociology is that sociologists aim to explain *patterns* in society. Most of the time, a pattern will not explain every single person’s experience, a fact about sociology that is both fascinating and frustrating. It is fascinating because, even though the individuals who create a pattern may not be the same over time and may not even know one another, collectively they create a pattern. Those new to sociology may find these patterns frustrating because they may believe that the patterns that describe their gender, their age, or some other facet of their lives don’t really represent their experience. It’s true. A pattern can exist among your cohort without your individual participation in it.

Let’s consider some specific examples. One area that sociologists commonly investigate is the impact of a person’s social class background on his or her experiences and lot in life. You probably wouldn’t be surprised to learn that a person’s social class background has an impact on his or her educational attainment and achievement. In fact, one group of researchers (Ellwood & Kane, 2000) in the early 1990s found that the percentage of children who did not receive any postsecondary schooling was four times greater among those in the lowest quartile income bracket than those in the upper quartile of income earners (i.e., children from high-income families were far more likely than low-income children to go on to college).Ellwood, D., & Kane, T. (2000). Who gets a college education? Family background and growing gaps in enrollment. In S. Danziger & J. Waldfogel (Eds.), *Securing the future* (pp. 283–324). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Another recent study found that having more liquid wealth that

can be easily converted into cash actually seems to predict children's math and reading achievement (Elliott, Jung, Kim, & Chowa, 2010).Elliott, W., Jung, H., Kim, K., & Chowa, G. (2010). A multi-group structural equation model (SEM) examining asset holding effects on educational attainment by race and gender. *Journal of Children & Poverty, 16*, 91–121.

These findings, that wealth and income shape a child's educational experiences, are probably not that shocking to any of us, even if we know someone who may be an exception to the rule. Sometimes the patterns that social scientists observe fit our commonly held beliefs about the way the world works. When this happens, we don't tend to take issue with the fact that patterns don't necessarily represent all people's experiences. But what happens when the patterns disrupt our assumptions?

For example, did you know that teachers are far more likely to encourage boys to think critically in school by asking them to expand on answers they give in class and by commenting on boys' remarks and observations? When girls speak up in class, teachers are more likely to simply nod and move on. The *pattern* of teachers engaging in more complex interactions with boys means that boys and girls do not receive the same educational experience in school (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan International. You and your classmates, both men and women, may find this news upsetting.

Objectors to these findings tend to cite evidence from their own personal experience, refuting that the pattern actually exists. The problem with this response, however, is that objecting to a social pattern on the grounds that it doesn't match one's individual experience misses the point about patterns.

Another matter that social scientists must consider is where they stand on the value of basic as opposed to applied research. In essence, this has to do with questions of for whom and for what purpose research is conducted. We can think of basic and applied research as resting on either end of a continuum. In sociology, **basic research** is sociology for sociology's sake. Nothing more, nothing less. Sometimes researchers are motivated to conduct research simply because they happen to be interested in a topic. In this case, the goal of the research may be to learn more about a topic. **Applied research** lies at the other end of the continuum. In sociology, applied research refers to sociology that is conducted for some purpose beyond or in addition to a researcher's interest in a topic. Applied research is often client focused, meaning that the researcher is investigating a question posed by someone other than her or himself. What do *you* think the purpose of sociology should be? Should sociologists conduct research for its own sake, if it has some identifiable application, or perhaps for something in between?

A trend some might say lies near the middle of the basic/applied continuum is public sociology. **Public sociology** refers the application of sociological theories and research to matters of public interest. You might recall from your introductory sociology class that sociology's origins in fact lie in matters of public interest: the desire to understand the consequences of industrialization and to find solutions for the ills of society (Henslin, 2006).Henslin, J. M. (2006). *Essentials of sociology: A down-to-earth approach* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. However, all sociologists have never agreed on what the purpose of sociology is or should be. The pendulum of interest in basic research to a more publicly focused sociology has swung back and forth over the many years that sociology has existed (Calhoun, 2007).Calhoun, C. (Ed.). (2007). *Sociology in America: A history*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Since 2004, when then-president of the American Sociological Association (ASA) Michael Burawoy (2005)Burawoy, M. (2005). 2004 presidential address: For public sociology. *American Sociological Review, 70*, 4–28. delivered a talk to the ASA membership imploring sociologists to become more publicly engaged in their work, a new wave of debate about the purpose of sociology began to build. Today, some argue that public sociology puts too little emphasis on sociology as a science,See, for example, Mathieu Deflem's arguments against public sociology on his website: http://www.savesociology.org. while others assert that sociology is, has been, and must remain public (Jeffries, 2009).Jeffries, V. (Ed.). (2009). *Handbook of sociology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. While there are no easy answers here, it is worth taking some time to think about your position on this issue. Your perspective on the purpose of sociology will shape the questions you ask in your research and may even shape how you attempt to answer those questions.

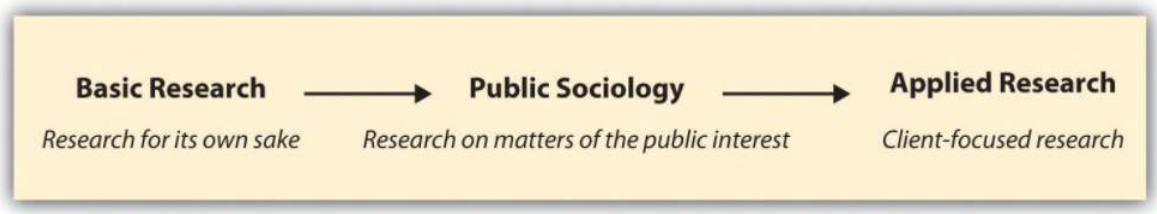

Figure 1.1.2.1: *Continuum of Sociological Research Types and Goals*

One final consideration that social scientists must be aware of is the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. **Qualitative methods** are ways of collecting data that yield results such as words or pictures. Some of the most common qualitative methods in sociology include field research, intensive interviews, and focus groups. **Quantitative methods**, on the other hand, result in data that can be represented by and condensed into numbers. Survey research is probably the most common quantitative method in sociology, but methods such as content analysis and interviewing can also be conducted in a way that yields quantitative data. While qualitative methods aim to gain an in-depth understanding of a relatively small number of cases, quantitative methods offer less depth but more breadth because they typically focus on a much larger number of cases.

Sometimes these two methods are presented or discussed in a way that suggests they are somehow in opposition to one another. The qualitative/quantitative debate is fueled by researchers who may prefer one approach over another, either because their own research questions are better suited to one particular approach or because they happened to have been trained in one specific method. In this text, we'll operate from the perspective that qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary rather than competing. While these two methodological approaches certainly differ, the main point is that they simply have different goals, strengths, and weaknesses. We'll explore the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of both approaches in more depth in later chapters.

In sum, social scientists should be aware of the following considerations:

1. Social science is concerned with patterns in society.
2. While individuals make up patterns, every individual need not be a part of a pattern in order for a pattern to exist.
3. Sociological research projects typically rest somewhere on a continuum from basic research to public sociology to applied research.
4. Qualitative methods are those that yield data such as words or pictures; quantitative methods are those that yield data such as numbers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sociology is a social science focused on patterns in society.
- Sometimes social science research is conducted for its own sake; other times it is focused on matters of public interest or on client-determined questions.
- Social scientists use both qualitative and quantitative methods. While different, these methods are often complementary.

EXERCISES

1. What should the purpose of sociology be? Posit an argument in favor and against both applied and basic research.
2. Want to know more about what public sociology looks like? Check out the following blog, written by sociological criminologists Chris Uggen, Michelle Inderbitzen, and Sara Wakefield: http://thesocietypages.org/pubcrim.
3. Feeling confused about how qualitative and quantitative methods can be complementary? Check out this comic strip that depicts the quantitative Team Number Validators joining forces with the qualitative Team Alpha Defenders as they fight to bring down the villain Dr. Plagiarism in the name of academic justice:

   (click to see video)

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1.1.3: Why Should We Care?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Be able to describe and discuss some of the reasons why students should care about social scientific research methods.
2. Identify the types of employment opportunities that exist for those with an understanding of social scientific research methods.

At this point, you may be wondering about the relevance of research methods to your life. Whether or not you choose to become a sociologist, you should care about research methods for two basic reasons: (a) research methods are regularly applied to solve social problems and issues that shape how our society is organized, thus you have to live with the results of research methods every day of your life, and (b) understanding research methods might actually help you land a job.

Consuming Research and Living With Its Results

Another *New Yorker* cartoon depicts two men chatting with each other at a bar. One is saying to the other, "Are you just pissing and moaning, or can you verify what you're saying with data?" (http://www.cartoonbank.com/1999/are-you-just-pissing-and-moaning-or-can-you-verify-what-youre-saying-with-data/invt/118737/). Which would you rather be, just a complainer or someone who can actually verify what you're saying? Understanding research methods and how they work can help position you to actually do more than just complain. Further, whether you know it or not, research probably has some impact on your life each and every day. Many of our laws, social policies, and court proceedings are grounded in some degree of empirical research (Jenkins & Kroll-Smith, 1996).Jenkins, P. J., & Kroll-Smith, S. (Eds.). (1996). *Witnessing for sociology: Sociologists in court*. Westport, CT: Praeger. That's not to say that all laws and social policies are good or make sense. However, you can't have an informed opinion about any of them without understanding where they come from, how they were formed, and what understandings our policymakers relied on in order to craft them.

A recent lawsuit against Walmart provides an example of sociological research in action. A sociologist named Professor William Bielby was enlisted by plaintiffs in the suit to conduct an analysis of Walmart's personnel policies in order to support their claim that Walmart engages in gender discriminatory practices. Bielby's analysis shows that Walmart's compensation and promotion decisions may indeed have been vulnerable to gender bias. In June 2011, the United States Supreme Court decided against allowing the case to proceed as a class-action lawsuit.*Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Dukes*, 564 U.S. (2011); The American Sociological Association filed an amicus brief in support of what would be the class of individuals claiming gender discrimination. You can read the brief at http://asanet.org/images/press/docs/pdf/Amicus_Brief_Wal-Mart_v__Dukes_et_al.pdf. For other recent amicus briefs filed by the ASA, see http://asanet.org/about/amicus_briefs.cfm. While a class-action suit was not pursued in this case, consider the impact that such a suit against one of our nation's largest employers could have on companies and their employees around the country and perhaps even on your individual experience as a consumer.Want to know more about the suit against Walmart or about Bielby's analysis for the case? Check out the following sources: Hart, M., & Secunda, P. M. (2009). A matter of context: Social framework evidence in employment discrimination class action. *Fordham Law Review, 78*, 37–70. Retrieved from http://www.fordhamlawreview.org/assets/pdfs/Vol_78/Hart_Secunda_October_2009.pdf

In addition to having to live with laws and policies that have been crafted based on social research, you are also a consumer of all kinds of research, and understanding methods can help you be a smarter consumer. Ever notice the magazine headlines that peer out at you while you are waiting in line to pay for your groceries? They are geared toward piquing your interest and making you believe that you will learn a great deal if you follow the advice in a particular article. However, since you would have no way of knowing whether the magazine's editors had gathered their data from a representative sample of people like you and your friends, you would have no reason to believe that the advice would be worthwhile. By having some understanding of research methods, you could avoid wasting your money by buying the magazine and wasting your time by following inappropriate advice.

Pick up or log on to just about any magazine or newspaper, or turn on just about any news broadcast, and chances are you'll hear something about some new and exciting research results. Understanding research methods will help you read past any hype and ask good questions about what you see and hear. In other words, research methods can help you become a more responsible consumer of public and popular information. And who wouldn't want to be more responsible?

Research as Employment Opportunity

There are many potential jobs out there for people with knowledge about how to conduct research. In fact, one of my very first jobs as a college graduate with a BA in sociology was at an **evaluation research** firm that hired me specifically because of the knowledge I'd gained in my college research methods class. While there, I worked as a data-collection coordinator, helping in the evaluation of local domestic violence shelters and transitional housing sites by administering satisfaction surveys to residents. I also helped collect data for a study on community member's thoughts and feelings about where they lived by conducting telephone interviews with a random sample of people who lived in the area. (This last project made me much more sensitive than I'd previously been to survey researchers who do cold-calling.) Without a background in research methods, I would not have been hired for this position.

Upon graduation from college, you, too, may enjoy the benefits of employment thanks to having learned social science research methods in college. Some current jobs of sociologists I know include jobs doing research in pharmaceutical companies to understand the social consequences of medications, conducting research for lobbying organizations, working in human resources, and so on. Other recent undergraduate sociology majors went on to conduct market research in the advertising industry, work for the United States Census and other federal government positions, and even help with the collection of data for large social science studies such as the **General Social Survey** (http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/About+GSS). Understanding research methods is important in all these jobs and careers. In addition, in 2009 the *Wall Street Journal* reported findings from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census Bureau showing that among 200 professions, sociologists have the eighth best job in the world (Needleman, 2009).Needleman, S. E. (2009, January 6). Doing the math to find the good jobs: Mathematicians land top spot in new ranking of best and worst occupations in the U.S. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123119236117055127.html So now you should have more knowledge about what you might do with your sociology degree. Understanding social scientific research methods can lead to the prospect of a very satisfying career.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Whether we know it or not, our everyday lives are shaped by social scientific research.
- Understanding social scientific research methods can help us become more astute and more responsible consumers of information.
- Knowledge about social scientific research methods is useful for a variety of jobs or careers.

EXERCISES

1. Page or scroll through a few popular magazines or news sources. Pull out any examples you see of results from social science research being discussed. How much information about the research is provided? What questions do you have about the research? To what extent will the research shape your actions or beliefs? How, if at all, is your answer to that question based on your confidence in the research described?
2. Want to know more about jobs and career possibilities for people with undergraduate sociology degrees? Check out the American Sociological Association's page on employment for sociologists: http://asanet.org/employment/factsoncareers.cfm.
3. Still not convinced about the value of sociology? If you happen to be someone who is swayed by star power, you might wish to peruse the following, which contains a list of famous sociology majors: http://www.asanet.org/students/famous.cfm.

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1.1.4: Design and Goals of This Text

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and describe the three main goals of this text.
2. Review the chapter layout for the text.

I hope that by this point you're convinced to read on a little further. Let me take an optimistic stance and give you an idea about what to expect for the next few hundred pages. As mentioned previously, three main goals shape the choices made about which materials are provided in the text and how those materials are presented. The first of those goals is for the materials presented in this text to have clear relevance to you whether you choose to pursue a career in research or not. In addition, you'll find that equal time and attention has been given to qualitative and quantitative research methods. Because sociological researchers use both types of methodology, it is important that sociology students gain an understanding of both approaches to research. Finally, I hope that you will find this text engaging and readable. Conducting research is a rewarding and exciting activity. Reading about research should be rewarding as well and, if not always exciting, it certainly shouldn't put you to sleep.

Chapter Layout

A quick glance at the table of contents will tell you that there are 15 chapters in all, each contained within some overarching subject group. After we spend the next couple of chapters introducing some general points and concerns about social research, we'll gradually get more specific.

Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project" through Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" outline the procedures involved in planning a research project. We'll consider how to begin a research project, how to design a project, and some issues related to measurement and sampling. Next we'll move on to the most exciting part of the research process: collecting data. In Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis", we'll grant equal time to qualitative and quantitative research methods and examine the methods most commonly used in sociological research.

The final set of chapters focuses on the social context of research. In this section, we'll revisit some of the points introduced here in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction" by reminding ourselves of why any of what you've read matters. We'll take a look at some of the principles and practices involved in sharing one's work; consider some tips for being responsible consumers of social scientific research; and review some of the ways that knowledge in research methods comes in handy for those interested in jobs, social change, or simply being engaged members of society.

What will be the payoff to you for reading all this material? Hopefully you will feel you've gained a real understanding of research methods, how and why they are relevant to *you*, and the importance of methods to sociological understanding about our world.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Relevance to you, the reader, and accessibility of writing are two major goals of this text.
- The text will provide equal coverage of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research.

EXERCISE

1. Look ahead and get a better idea of what's to come by perusing the book's table of contents.

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1.2: Linking Methods With Theory

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1.2.1: Micro, Meso, and Macro Approaches

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe a microlevel approach to research, and provide an example of a microlevel study.
2. Describe a mesolevel approach to research, and provide an example of a mesolevel study.
3. Describe a macrolevel approach to research, and provide an example of a macrolevel study.

Before we discuss the more specific details of paradigms and theories, let's look broadly at three possible levels of inquiry on which social scientific investigations might be based. These three levels demonstrate that while sociologists share some common beliefs about the value of investigating and understanding human interaction, at what *level* they investigate that interaction will vary.

At the micro level, sociologists examine the smallest levels of interaction; even in some cases, just "the self" alone. Microlevel analyses might include one-on-one interactions between couples or friends. Or perhaps a sociologist is interested in how a person's perception of self is influenced by his or her social context. In each of these cases, the level of inquiry is micro. When sociologists investigate groups, their inquiry is at the meso level. Sociologists who conduct mesolevel research might study how norms of workplace behavior vary across professions or how children's sporting clubs are organized, to cite two examples. At the macro level, sociologists examine social structures and institutions. Research at the macro level examines large-scale patterns. In recent years, sociologists have become increasingly interested in the process and impacts of globalization. A study of globalization that examines the interrelationships between nations would be an example of a macrolevel study.

Sociology at Three Different Levels

Let's take a closer look at some specific examples of sociological research to better understand each of the three levels of inquiry described previously. Some topics are best suited to be examined at one particular level, while other topics can be studied at each of the three different levels. The particular level of inquiry might shape a sociologist's questions about the topic, or a sociologist might view the topic from different angles depending on the level of inquiry being employed.

First let's consider some examples of different topics that are best suited to a particular level of inquiry. Work by Stephen Marks offers an excellent example of research at the **micro** level. In one study, Marks and Shelley MacDermid (1996)Marks, S. R., & MacDermid, S. M. (1996). Multiple roles and the self: A theory of role balance. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58*, 417–432. draw from prior microlevel theories to empirically study how people balance their roles and identities. In this study, the researchers found that people who experience balance across their multiple roles and activities report lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem and well-being than their less-balanced counterparts. In another study, Marks and colleagues examined the conditions under which husbands and wives feel the most balance across their many roles. They found that different factors are important for different genders. For women, having more paid work hours and more couple time were among the most important factors. For men, having leisure time with their nuclear families was important, and role balance decreased as work hours increased (Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001).Marks, S. R., Huston, T. L., Johnson, E. M., & MacDermid, S. M. (2001). Role balance among white married couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63*, 1083–1098. Both of these studies fall within the category of microlevel analysis.

At the **meso** level, sociologists tend to study the experiences of groups and the interactions between groups. In a recent book based on their research with Somali immigrants, Kim Huisman and colleagues (Huisman, Hough, Langellier, & Toner, 2011)Huisman, K. A., Hough, M., Langellier, K. M., & Toner, C. N. (2011). *Somalis in Maine: Crossing cultural currents*. New York, NY: Random House. examine the interactions between Somalis and Americans in Maine. These researchers found that stereotypes about refugees being unable or unwilling to assimilate and being overly dependent on local social systems are unsubstantiated. In a much different study of group-level interactions, Michael Messner (2009)Messner, M. A. (2009). *It's all for the kids: Gender, families, and youth sports*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. conducted research on children's sports leagues. Messner studied interactions among parent volunteers, among youth participants, and between league organizers and parents and found that gender boundaries and hierarchies are perpetuated by the adults who run such leagues. These two studies, while very different in their specific points of focus, have in common their mesolevel focus.

Sociologists who conduct **macro**level research study interactions at the broadest level, such as interactions between nations or comparisons across nations. One example of macrolevel research can be seen in a recent article by David Frank and colleagues (Frank, Camp, & Boutcher, 2010).Frank, D., Camp, B., & Boutcher, S. (2010). Worldwide trends in the criminal regulation of sex,

1945–2005. *American Sociological Review, 75*, 867–893. These researchers examined worldwide changes over time in laws regulating sex. By comparing laws across a number of countries over a period of many years (1945–2005), Frank learned that laws regulating rape, adultery, sodomy, and child sexual abuse shifted in focus from protecting larger entities, such as families, to protecting individuals. In another macrolevel study, Leah Ruppanner (2010)Ruppanner, L. E. (2010). Cross-national reports of housework: An investigation of the gender empowerment measure. *Social Science Research*, *39*, 963–975. studied how national levels of gender equality in 25 different countries affect couples' divisions of housework. Ruppanner found, among other patterns, that as women's parliamentary representation increases, so, too, does men's participation in housework.

While it is true that some topics lend themselves to a particular level of inquiry, there are many topics that could be studied from any of the three levels. The choice depends on the specific interest of the researcher, the approach he or she would like to take, and the sorts of questions he or she wants to be able to answer about the topic. Let's look at an example. Gang activity has been a topic of interest to sociologists for many years and has been studied from each of the levels of inquiry described here. At the micro level, sociologists might study the inner workings of a specific gang, communication styles, and what everyday life is like for gang members. Though not written by a sociologist, one example of a microlevel analysis of gang activity can be found in Sanyika Shakur's 1993 autobiography, *Monster*.Shakur, S. (1993). *Monster: The autobiography of an L.A. gang member*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press. In his book, Shakur describes his former day-to-day life as a member of the Crips in south-central Los Angeles. Shakur's recounting of experiences highlights microlevel interactions between himself, fellow Crips members, and other gangs.

At the meso level, sociologists are likely to examine interactions between gangs or perhaps how different branches of the same gang vary from one area to the next. At the macro level, we could compare the impact of gang activity across communities or examine the economic impact of gangs on nations. Excellent examples of gang research at all three levels of analysis can be found in the *Journal of Gang Research* published by the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC).The *Journal of Gang Research* is the official publication of the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC). You can learn more about the NGCRC and the journal at http://www.ngcrc.com. Sudir Venkatesh's study (2008),Venkatesh, S. (2008). *Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist takes to the streets*. New York, NY: Penguin Group. *Gang Leader for a Day*, is an example of research on gangs that utilizes all three levels of analysis. Venkatesh conducted participant observation with a gang in Chicago. He learned about the everyday lives of gang members (micro) and how the gang he studied interacted with and fit within the landscape of other gang "franchises" (meso). In addition, Venkatesh described the impact of the gang on the broader community and economy (macro).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sociological research can occur at any of the following three analytical levels: micro, meso, or macro.
- Some topics lend themselves to one particular analytical level while others could be studied from any, or all, of the three levels of analysis.

EXERCISES

1. Think about a topic that you'd like to study. From what analytical level do you think it makes sense to study your topic? Why?
2. Find an example of published sociological research that examines a single topic from each of the three analytical levels. Describe how the researcher employs each of the three levels in her or his analysis.
3. To learn more about micro sociology, check out the Social Psychology section of the American Sociological Association: http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/socpsych/ASA. What does your perusal of this site teach you about the micro sociological perspective that you did not know before?
4. To learn more about macro sociology, check out the American Sociological Association's section on Global and Transnational Sociology: http://www2.asanet.org/sectionglobal. What does your perusal of this site teach you about the macro sociological perspective that you did not know before?

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1.2.2: Paradigms, Theories, and How They Shape a Researcher's Approach

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define paradigm, and describe the significance of paradigms.
2. Identify and describe the four predominant paradigms found in the social sciences.
3. Define theory.
4. Describe the role that theory plays in sociological inquiry.

The terms paradigm and theory are often used interchangeably in social science, although social scientists do not always agree whether these are identical or distinct concepts. In this text, we will make a slight distinction between the two ideas because thinking about each concept as analytically distinct provides a useful framework for understanding the connections between research methods and social scientific ways of thinking.

Paradigms in Social Science

For our purposes, we'll define **paradigm** as an analytic lens, a way of viewing the world and a framework from which to understand the human experience (Kuhn, 1962).See Kuhn's seminal work for more on paradigms: Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. It can be difficult to fully grasp the idea of paradigmatic assumptions because we are very ingrained in our own, personal everyday way of thinking. For example, let's look at people's views on abortion. To some, abortion is a medical procedure that should be undertaken at the discretion of each individual woman who might experience an unwanted pregnancy. To others, abortion is murder and members of society should collectively have the right to decide when, if at all, abortion should be undertaken. Chances are, if you have an opinion about this topic you are pretty certain about the veracity of your perspective. Then again, the person who sits next to you in class may have a very different opinion and yet be equally confident about the truth of his or her perspective. Which of you is correct? You are each operating under a set of assumptions about the way the world does—or at least should—work. Perhaps your assumptions come from your particular political perspective, which helps shape your view on a variety of social issues, or perhaps your assumptions are based on what you learned from your parents or in church. In any case, there is a paradigm that shapes your stance on the issue.

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction" we discussed the various ways that we know what we know. Paradigms are a way of framing what we know, what we can know, and how we can know it. In social science, there are several predominant paradigms, each with its own unique ontological and epistemological perspective. Let's look at four of the most common social scientific paradigms that might guide you as you begin to think about conducting research.

The first paradigm we'll consider, called **positivism**, is probably the framework that comes to mind for many of you when you think of science. Positivism is guided by the principles of objectivity, knowability, and deductive logic. Deductive logic is discussed in more detail in the section that follows. Auguste Comte, whom you might recall from your introduction to sociology class as the person who coined the term *sociology*, argued that sociology should be a positivist science (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004).Ritzer, G., & Goodman, D. J. (2004). *Classical sociological theory* (4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. The positivist framework operates from the assumption that society can and should be studied empirically and scientifically. Positivism also calls for a **value-free sociology**, one in which researchers aim to abandon their biases and values in a quest for objective, empirical, and knowable truth.

Another predominant paradigm in sociology is **social constructionism**. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966)Berger, P. L., & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York, NY: Doubleday. are credited by many for having developed this perspective in sociology. While positivists seek "the truth," the social constructionist framework posits that "truth" is a varying, socially constructed, and ever-changing notion. This is because we, according to this paradigm, create reality ourselves (as opposed to it simply existing and us working to discover it) through our interactions and our interpretations of those interactions. Key to the social constructionist perspective is the idea that social context and interaction frame our realities. Researchers operating within this framework take keen interest in how people come to socially agree, or disagree, about what is real and true. Consideration of how meanings of different hand gestures vary across different regions of the world aptly demonstrates that meanings are constructed socially and collectively. Think about what it means to you when you see a person raise his or her middle finger. We probably all know that person isn't very happy (nor is the person to whom the finger is being directed). In some societies, it is another gesture, the thumbs up, that raises eyebrows. While the thumbs up may have a particular meaning in our culture, that meaning is not shared across cultures (Wong, 2007).For more about how the meanings of

hand gestures vary by region, you might read the following blog entry: Wong, W. (2007). The top 10 hand gestures you'd better get right. Retrieved from http://www.languagetrainers.co.uk/blog/2007/09/24/top-10-hand-gestures

It would be a mistake to think of the social constructionist perspective as only individualistic. While individuals may construct their own realities, groups—from a small one such as a married couple to large ones such as nations—often agree on notions of what is true and what "is." In other words, the meanings that we construct have power beyond the individual people who create them. Therefore, the ways that people work to change such meanings is of as much interest to social constructionists as how they were created in the first place.

A third paradigm is the **critical paradigm**. At its core, the critical paradigm is focused on power, inequality, and social change. Although some rather diverse perspectives are included here, the critical paradigm, in general, includes ideas developed by early social theorists, such as Max Horkheimer (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk),Calhoun, C., Gerteis, J., Moody, J., Pfaff, S., & Virk, I. (Eds.). (2007). *Classical sociological theory* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell. and later works developed by feminist scholars, such as Nancy Fraser (1989).Fraser, N. (1989). *Unruly practices: Power, discourse, and gender in cotemporary social theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Unlike the positivist paradigm, the critical paradigm posits that social science can never be truly objective or value-free. Further, this paradigm operates from the perspective that scientific investigation should be conducted with the express goal of social change in mind.

Finally, **postmodernism** is a paradigm that challenges almost every way of knowing that many social scientists take for granted (Best & Kellner, 1991).Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. New York, NY: Guilford. While positivists claim that there is an objective, knowable truth, postmodernists would say that there is not. While social constructionists may argue that truth is in the eye of the beholder (or in the eye of the group that agrees on it), postmodernists may claim that we can never really know such truth because, in the studying and reporting of others' truths, the researcher stamps her or his own truth on the investigation. Finally, while the critical paradigm may argue that power, inequality, and change shape reality and truth, a postmodernist may in turn ask, whose power, whose inequality, whose change, whose reality, and whose truth? As you might imagine, the postmodernist paradigm poses quite a challenge for social scientific researchers. How does one study something that may or may not be real or that is only real in your current and unique experience of it? This fascinating question is worth pondering as you begin to think about conducting your own sociological research. Table 1.2.2.1 "Social Scientific Paradigms" summarizes each of the paradigms discussed here.

Table 1.2.2.1:Social Scientific Paradigms

Paradigm	Emphasis	Assumption
Positivism	Objectivity, knowability, and deductive logic	Society can and should be studied empirically and scientifically.
Social constructionism	Truth as varying, socially constructed, and ever-changing	Reality is created collectively and that social context and interaction frame our realities.
Critical	Power, inequality, and social change	Social science can never be truly value-free and should be conducted with the express goal of social change in mind.
Postmodernism	Inherent problems with previous paradigms	Truth in any form may or may not be knowable.

Sociological Theories

Much like paradigms, theories provide a way of looking at the world and of understanding human interaction. Like paradigms, theories can be sweeping in their coverage. Some sociological theories, for example, aim to explain the very existence and continuation of society as we know it. Unlike paradigms, however, theories might be narrower in focus, perhaps just aiming to understand one particular phenomenon, without attempting to tackle a broader level of explanation. In a nutshell, **theory** might be thought of as a way of explanation or as "an explanatory statement that fits the evidence" (Quammen, 2004).Quammen, D. (2004, November). Was Darwin wrong? *National Geographic*, pp. 2–35. At their core, theories can be used to provide explanations of any number or variety of phenomena. They help us answer the "why" questions we often have about the patterns we observe in social life. Theories also often help us answer our "how" questions. While paradigms may point us in a particular direction with respect to our "why" questions, theories more specifically map out the explanation, or the "how," behind the "why."

Introductory sociology textbooks typically teach students about “the big three” sociological theories—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism (Barkan, 2011; Henslin, 2010).The theory discussions in each of the following texts provide useful examples: [citation redacted per publisher request]; Henslin, J. M. (2010). *Sociology: A down to earth approach, core concepts* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson. Most also mention at least a few additional theories or theorists (Sprague, 1997).See Sprague’s 1997 critique of social theory for a compelling and well-developed argument in favor of sociology reorganizing theory with the aim of increasing its relevance to social life today and bridging, rather than building, boundaries across diverse perspectives and disciplines: Sprague, J. (1997). Holy men and big guns: The can[n]on in social theory. *Gender & Society, 11*, 88–107. As you probably recall from your introductory sociology course, structural functionalists focus on the interrelations between various parts of society and how each part works with the others to make society function in the way that it does. Conflict theorists are interested in questions of power and who wins and who loses based on the way that society is organized. Finally, symbolic interactionists focus on how meaning is created and negotiated though meaningful (i.e., symbolic) interactions. Just as researchers might examine the same topic from different levels of inquiry, so, too, could they investigate the same topic from different theoretical perspectives. In this case, even their research questions could be the same, but the way they make sense of whatever phenomenon it is they are investigating will be shaped in large part by the theoretical assumptions that lie behind their investigation.

Table 1.2.2.2 "Sociological Theories and the Study of Sport" summarizes the major points of focus for each of major three theories and outlines how a researcher might approach the study of the same topic, in this case the study of sport, from each of the three perspectives.

Table 1.2.2.2:Sociological Theories and the Study of Sport

Paradigm	Focuses on	A study of sport might examine
Structural functionalism	Interrelations between parts of society; how parts work together	Positive, negative, intended, and unintended consequences of professional sport leagues
Conflict theory	Who wins and who loses based on the way that society is organized	Issues of power in sport such as differences in access to and participation in sport
Symbolic interactionism	How meaning is created and negotiated though interactions	How the rules of sport of are constructed, taught, and learned

Within each area of specialization in sociology, there are many other theories that aim to explain more specific types of interactions. For example, within the sociological study of sexual harassment, different theories posit different explanations for why harassment occurs. One theory, first developed by criminologists, is called routine activities theory. It posits that sexual harassment is most likely to occur when a workplace lacks unified groups and when potentially vulnerable targets and motivated offenders are both present (DeCoster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999).DeCoster, S., Estes, S. B., & Mueller, C. W. (1999). Routine activities and sexual harassment in the workplace. *Work and Occupations, 26*, 21–49. Other theories of sexual harassment, called relational theories, suggest that a person’s relationships, such as their marriages or friendships, are the key to understanding why and how workplace sexual harassment occurs and how people will respond to it when it does occur (Morgan, 1999).Morgan, P. A. (1999). Risking relationships: Understanding the litigation choices of sexually harassed women. *The Law and Society Review, 33*, 201–226. Relational theories focus on the power that different social relationships provide (e.g., married people who have supportive partners at home might be more likely than those who lack support at home to report sexual harassment when it occurs). Finally, feminist theories of sexual harassment take a different stance. These theories posit that the way our current gender system is organized, where those who are the most masculine have the most power, best explains why and how workplace sexual harassment occurs (MacKinnon, 1979).MacKinnon, C. 1979. *Sexual harassment of working women: A case of sex discrimination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. As you might imagine, which theory a researcher applies to examine the topic of sexual harassment will shape the questions the researcher asks about harassment. It will also shape the explanations the researcher provides for why harassment occurs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Paradigms shape our everyday view of the world.
- Sociologists use theory to help frame their research questions and to help them make sense of the answers to those questions.

- Some sociological theories are rather sweeping in their coverage and attempt to explain, broadly, how and why societies are organized in particular ways.
- Other sociological theories aim to explain more specific events or interactions.

EXERCISES

1. Of the four paradigms described, which do you find most compelling? Why?
2. Feeling confused about the social constructionism paradigm? Check out the 10-minute lecture that illustrates this framework online at: http://www.youtube.com/v/GVVWmZAStn8.

   After watching this lecture, come up with a two- to four-sentence description of social constructionism that would make sense to someone who has no background in sociological theory.

1.2.2: Paradigms, Theories, and How They Shape a Researcher's Approach is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

1.2.3: Inductive or Deductive? Two Different Approaches

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the inductive approach to research, and provide examples of inductive research.
2. Describe the deductive approach to research, and provide examples of deductive research.
3. Describe the ways that inductive and deductive approaches may be complementary.

Theories structure and inform sociological research. So, too, does research structure and inform theory. The reciprocal relationship between theory and research often becomes evident to students new to these topics when they consider the relationships between theory and research in inductive and deductive approaches to research. In both cases, theory is crucial. But the relationship between theory and research differs for each approach. Inductive and deductive approaches to research are quite different, but they can also be complementary. Let's start by looking at each one and how they differ from one another. Then we'll move on to thinking about how they complement one another.

Inductive Approaches and Some Examples

In an **inductive approach** to research, a researcher begins by collecting data that is relevant to his or her topic of interest. Once a substantial amount of data have been collected, the researcher will then take a breather from data collection, stepping back to get a bird's eye view of her data. At this stage, the researcher looks for patterns in the data, working to develop a theory that could explain those patterns. Thus when researchers take an inductive approach, they start with a set of observations and then they move from those particular experiences to a more general set of propositions about those experiences. In other words, they move from data to theory, or from the specific to the general. Figure 1.2.3.1 "Inductive Research" outlines the steps involved with an inductive approach to research.

Figure 1.2.3.1: *Inductive Research*

There are many good examples of inductive research, but we'll look at just a few here. One fascinating recent study in which the researchers took an inductive approach was Katherine Allen, Christine Kaestle, and Abbie Goldberg's study (2011)Allen, K. R., Kaestle, C. E., & Goldberg, A. E. (2011). More than just a punctuation mark: How boys and young men learn about menstruation. *Journal of Family Issues*, *32*, 129–156. of how boys and young men learn about menstruation. To understand this process, Allen and her colleagues analyzed the written narratives of 23 young men in which the men described how they learned about menstruation, what they thought of it when they first learned about it, and what they think of it now. By looking for patterns across all 23 men's narratives, the researchers were able to develop a general theory of how boys and young men learn about this aspect of girls' and women's biology. They conclude that sisters play an important role in boys' early understanding of menstruation, that menstruation makes boys feel somewhat separated from girls, and that as they enter young adulthood and form romantic relationships, young men develop more mature attitudes about menstruation.

In another inductive study, Kristin Ferguson and colleagues (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011)Ferguson, K. M., Kim, M. A., & McCoy, S. (2011). Enhancing empowerment and leadership among homeless youth in agency and community settings: A grounded theory approach. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *28*, 1–22. analyzed empirical data to better understand how best to meet the needs of young people who are homeless. The authors analyzed data from focus groups with 20 young people at a homeless shelter. From these data they developed a set of recommendations for those interested in applied interventions that serve homeless youth. The researchers also developed hypotheses for people who might wish to conduct further investigation of the topic. Though Ferguson and her colleagues did not test the hypotheses that they developed from their analysis, their study ends where most deductive investigations begin: with a set of testable hypotheses.

Deductive Approaches and Some Examples

Researchers taking a **deductive approach** take the steps described earlier for inductive research and reverse their order. They start with a social theory that they find compelling and then test its implications with data. That is, they move from a more general level to a more specific one. A deductive approach to research is the one that people typically associate with scientific investigation. The researcher studies what others have done, reads existing theories of whatever phenomenon he or she is studying, and then tests hypotheses that emerge from those theories. Figure 1.2.3.1 "Deductive Research" outlines the steps involved with a deductive approach to research.

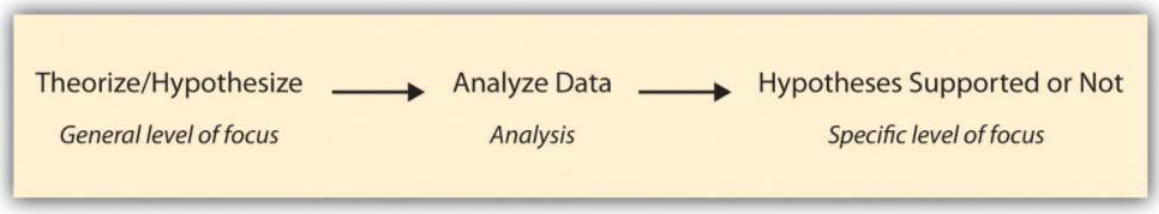

Figure 1.2.3.2: *Deductive Research*

While not all researchers follow a deductive approach, as you have seen in the preceding discussion, many do, and there are a number of excellent recent examples of deductive research. We'll take a look at a couple of those next.

In a study of US law enforcement responses to hate crimes, Ryan King and colleagues (King, Messner, & Baller, 2009)King, R. D., Messner, S. F., & Baller, R. D. (2009). Contemporary hate crimes, law enforcement, and the legacy of racial violence. *American Sociological Review, 74*, 291–315. hypothesized that law enforcement's response would be less vigorous in areas of the country that had a stronger history of racial violence. The authors developed their hypothesis from their reading of prior research and theories on the topic. Next, they tested the hypothesis by analyzing data on states' lynching histories and hate crime responses. Overall, the authors found support for their hypothesis.

In another recent deductive study, Melissa Milkie and Catharine Warner (2011)Milkie, M. A., & Warner, C. H. (2011). Classroom learning environments and the mental health of first grade children. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 52*, 4–22. studied the effects of different classroom environments on first graders' mental health. Based on prior research and theory, Milkie and Warner hypothesized that negative classroom features, such as a lack of basic supplies and even heat, would be associated with emotional and behavioral problems in children. The researchers found support for their hypothesis, demonstrating that policymakers should probably be paying more attention to the mental health outcomes of children's school experiences, just as they track academic outcomes (American Sociological Association, 2011).The American Sociological Association wrote a press release on Milkie and Warner's findings: American Sociological Association. (2011). Study: Negative classroom environment adversely affects children's mental health. Retrieved from http://asanet.org/press/Negative_Classroom_Environment_Adversely_Affects_Childs_Mental_Health.cfm

Complementary Approaches?

While inductive and deductive approaches to research seem quite different, they can actually be rather complementary. In some cases, researchers will plan for their research to include multiple components, one inductive and the other deductive. In other cases, a researcher might begin a study with the plan to only conduct either inductive or deductive research, but then he or she discovers along the way that the other approach is needed to help illuminate findings. Here is an example of each such case.

In the case of my collaborative research on sexual harassment, we began the study knowing that we would like to take both a deductive and an inductive approach in our work. We therefore administered a quantitative survey, the responses to which we could analyze in order to test hypotheses, and also conducted qualitative interviews with a number of the survey participants. The survey data were well suited to a deductive approach; we could analyze those data to test hypotheses that were generated based on theories of harassment. The interview data were well suited to an inductive approach; we looked for patterns across the interviews and then tried to make sense of those patterns by theorizing about them.

For one paper (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004),Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2004). Sexual harassment as a gendered expression of power. *American Sociological Review, 69*, 64–92. we began with a prominent feminist theory of the sexual harassment of adult women and developed a set of hypotheses outlining how we expected the theory to apply in the case of younger women's and men's harassment experiences. We then tested our hypotheses by analyzing the survey data. In general, we found support for the theory that posited that the current gender system, in which heteronormative men wield the most power in the workplace, explained

workplace sexual harassment—not just of adult women but of younger women and men as well. In a more recent paper (Blackstone, Houle, & Uggen, 2006),Blackstone, A., Houle, J., & Uggen, C. “At the time I thought it was great”: Age, experience, and workers’ perceptions of sexual harassment. Presented at the 2006 meetings of the American Sociological Association. Currently under review. we did not hypothesize about what we might find but instead inductively analyzed the interview data, looking for patterns that might tell us something about how or whether workers’ perceptions of harassment change as they age and gain workplace experience. From this analysis, we determined that workers’ perceptions of harassment did indeed shift as they gained experience and that their later definitions of harassment were more stringent than those they held during adolescence. Overall, our desire to understand young workers’ harassment experiences fully—in terms of their objective workplace experiences, their perceptions of those experiences, and their stories of their experiences—led us to adopt both deductive and inductive approaches in the work.

Researchers may not always set out to employ both approaches in their work but sometimes find that their use of one approach leads them to the other. One such example is described eloquently in Russell Schutt’s *Investigating the Social World* (2006).Schutt, R. K. (2006). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. As Schutt describes, researchers Lawrence Sherman and Richard Berk (1984)Sherman, L. W., & Berk, R. A. (1984). The specific deterrent effects of arrest for domestic assault. *American Sociological Review, 49*, 261–272. conducted an experiment to test two competing theories of the effects of punishment on deterring deviance (in this case, domestic violence). Specifically, Sherman and Berk hypothesized that *deterrence theory* would provide a better explanation of the effects of arresting accused batterers than *labeling theory*. Deterrence theory predicts that arresting an accused spouse batterer will *reduce* future incidents of violence. Conversely, labeling theory predicts that arresting accused spouse batterers will *increase* future incidents. Figure 1.2.3.3 "Predicting the Effects of Arrest on Future Spouse Battery" summarizes the two competing theories and the predictions that Sherman and Berk set out to test.

Theory	**Prediction**
Deterrence Theory	Arrest → ↓ Incidents of domestic violence
Labeling Theory	Arrest → ↑ Incidents of domestic violence

Figure 1.2.3.3: *Predicting the Effects of Arrest on Future Spouse Battery*

Sherman and Berk found, after conducting an experiment with the help of local police in one city, that arrest did in fact deter future incidents of violence, thus supporting their hypothesis that deterrence theory would better predict the effect of arrest. After conducting this research, they and other researchers went on to conduct similar experimentsThe researchers did what’s called replication. in six additional cities (Berk, Campbell, Klap, & Western, 1992; Pate & Hamilton, 1992; Sherman & Smith, 1992).Berk, R., Campbell, A., Klap, R., & Western, B. (1992). The deterrent effect of arrest in incidents of domestic violence: A Bayesian analysis of four field experiments. *American Sociological Review, 57*, 698–708; Pate, A., & Hamilton, E. (1992). Formal and informal deterrents to domestic violence: The Dade county spouse assault experiment. *American Sociological Review, 57*, 691–697; Sherman, L., & Smith, D. (1992). Crime, punishment, and stake in conformity: Legal and informal control of domestic violence. *American Sociological Review, 57*, 680–690. Results from these follow-up studies were mixed. In some cases, arrest deterred future incidents of violence. In other cases, it did not. This left the researchers with new data that they needed to explain. The researchers therefore took an inductive approach in an effort to make sense of their latest empirical observations. The new studies revealed that arrest seemed to have a deterrent effect for those who were married and employed but that it led to increased offenses for those who were unmarried and unemployed. Researchers thus turned to control theory, which predicts that having some stake in conformity through the social ties provided by marriage and employment, as the better explanation.

Theory	Prediction
~~Deterrence Theory~~	~~Arrest → ↓ Incidents of domestic violence~~
~~Labeling Theory~~	~~Arrest → ↑ Incidents of domestic violence~~
Control Theory	Arrest → ↓ Incidents of domestic violence for the married and employed Arrest → ↑ Incidents of domestic violence for the unmarried and unemployed

Figure 1.2.3.4: *Predicting the Effects of Arrest on Future Spouse Battery: A New Theory*

What the Sherman and Berk research, along with the follow-up studies, shows us is that we might start with a deductive approach to research, but then, if confronted by new data that we must make sense of, we may move to an inductive approach. Russell Schutt depicts this process quite nicely in his text, and I've adapted his depiction here, in Figure 1.2.3.4 "The Research Process: Moving From Deductive to Inductive in a Study of Domestic Violence Recidivism".

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The inductive approach involves beginning with a set of empirical observations, seeking patterns in those observations, and then theorizing about those patterns.
- The deductive approach involves beginning with a theory, developing hypotheses from that theory, and then collecting and analyzing data to test those hypotheses.
- Inductive and deductive approaches to research can be employed together for a more complete understanding of the topic that a researcher is studying.
- Though researchers don't always set out to use both inductive and deductive strategies in their work, they sometimes find that new questions arise in the course of an investigation that can best be answered by employing both approaches.

EXERCISES

1. For a hilarious example of logic gone awry, check out the following clip from

   Monty Python and Holy Grail:

   (click to see video)

   Do the townspeople take an inductive or deductive approach to determine whether the woman in question is a witch? What are some of the different sources of knowledge (recall Chapter 1.1 "Introduction") they rely on?

2. Think about how you could approach a study of the relationship between gender and driving over the speed limit. How could you learn about this relationship using an inductive approach? What would a study of the same relationship look like if examined using a deductive approach? Try the same thing with any topic of your choice. How might you study the topic inductively? Deductively?

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1.2.4: Revisiting an Earlier Question

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how theories and paradigms are relevant to sociological inquiry.
2. Understand how different levels of analysis and different approaches such as inductive and deductive can shape the way that a topic is investigated.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked, what's theory got to do with it? Perhaps at the time, you weren't entirely sure, but I hope you now have some ideas about how you might answer the question. Just in case, let's review the ways that theories are relevant to social scientific research methods.

Theories, paradigms, levels of analysis, and the order in which one proceeds in the research process all play an important role in shaping what we ask about the social world, how we ask it, and in some cases, even what we are likely to find. A microlevel study of gangs will look much different than a macrolevel study of gangs. In some cases you could apply multiple levels of analysis to your investigation, but doing so isn't always practical or feasible. Therefore, understanding the different levels of analysis and being aware of which level you happen to be employing is crucial. One's theoretical perspective will also shape a study. In particular, the theory invoked will likely shape not only the way a question about a topic is asked but also which topic gets investigated in the first place. Further, if you find yourself especially committed to one paradigm over another, the possible answers you are likely to see to the questions that you pose are limited.

This does not mean that social science is biased or corrupt. At the same time, we humans can never claim to be entirely value free. Social constructionists and postmodernists might point out that bias is always a part of research to at least some degree. Our job as researchers is to recognize and address our biases as part of the research process, if an imperfect part. We all use particular approaches, be they theories, levels of analysis, or temporal processes, to frame and conduct our work. Understanding those frames and approaches is crucial not only for successfully embarking upon and completing any research-based investigation but also for responsibly reading and understanding others' work. So what's theory got to do with it? Just about everything.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The theory being invoked, and the paradigm from which a researcher frames his or her work, can shape not only the questions asked but also the answers discovered.
- Different levels of analysis lead to different points of focus on any given topic.
- Whether a researcher takes an inductive or deductive approach will determine the process by which he or she attempts to answer his or her research question.

EXERCISES

Still not convinced about the value of theory? Perhaps "The Three Minute Sociologist" will change your mind:

(click to see video)

What does this video suggest about the value of theory?

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1.3: Beginning a Research Project

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1.3.1: Introduction

Choosing a Topic

Do you like to watch movies? Do you have a pet that you care about? Do you wonder what you and your peers might do with your degrees once you've finished college? Do you wonder how many people on your campus have heard of the BP oil spill of 2010, how many know that Barack Obama is our president, or how many know that their tuition may be raised by 20% next year? Have you ever felt that you were treated differently at work because of your gender? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you may have just the sort of intellectual curiosity required to conduct a sociological research project.

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1.3.2: Starting Where You Already Are

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define starting where you are, and describe how it works.
2. Identify and describe two overarching questions researchers should ask themselves about where they already are.

The preceding questions are all real questions that real sociology students have asked—and answered—in a research methods class just like the one that you are currently taking. In some cases, these students knew they had a keen interest in a topic before beginning their research methods class. For example, BethAll student names are pseudonyms. was a sociology and political science double major who wanted to know what her peers really knew about current events. Did they know about national events, such as the results of the most recent presidential election? Did they know about disasters that could affect their plans to enjoy the surf on the west coast of Florida over the summer? Did they know that local papers were reporting rumors of a tuition hike that could change their own ability to pay the rent? Matt, a sociology major, also started off with an interest in a focused topic. He had begun to worry about what he would do with his sociology degree when he graduated, and so he designed a project to learn more about what other sociology majors did and planned to do.

In other cases, students did not start out with a specific interest linked to their academic pursuits, but these students, too, were able to identify research topics worthy of investigation. These students knew, for example, how they enjoyed spending their free time. Perhaps at first these students didn't realize that they could identify and answer a sociological research question about their hobbies, but they certainly learned that they could once they had done a little brainstorming. For example, Dirk enjoyed reading about and watching movies, so he conducted a project on the relationship between movie reviews and movie success. Sarah, who enjoyed spending time with her pet cat, designed a project to learn more about animal–human relationships.

Even students who claimed to have "absolutely no interests whatsoever" usually discovered that they could come up with a sociological research question simply by stepping back, taking a bird's eye view of their daily lives, and identifying some interesting patterns there. This was the case for Allison, who made some remarkable discoveries about her restaurant job, where she had applied to work as a cook but was hired to work as a waitress. When Allison realized that all the servers at the restaurant were women and all the cooks were men, she began to wonder whether employees had been assigned different roles based on their gender identities. Allison's epiphany led her to investigate how jobs and workplace stereotypes are gendered. Like Allison, Teresa also struggled to identify a research topic. Her academic experiences had not inspired any specific research interests, and when asked about hobbies, Teresa claimed to have none. When asked what really annoys her, it occurred to Teresa that she resented the amount of time her friends spent watch and discussing the reality television show *The Bachelor*. This realization led Teresa to her own aha moment: She would investigate who watches reality television and why.

In each of these cases, students did what sociologists refer to as **starting where you are**, an idea eloquently described in previous research methods texts by John and Lyn Lofland (1995)Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. and by Kristin Esterberg (2002; MacLeod, 2008).Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill; for a superb account of starting where you already are, see the appendix (On the making of *Ain't no makin' it*) in Jay MacLeod's book, *Ain't no makin' it*. Incidentally, the research on which MacLeod's book is based began as his undergraduate sociology thesis. MacLeod, J. (2008). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Whether it was thinking about a question they'd had for some time, identifying a question about their own interests and hobbies, or taking a look at patterns in their everyday life, every student in these research methods classes managed both to identify a sociological research question that was of interest to them and to collect data to help answer that question. In this chapter we'll focus on how to identify possible topics for study, how to make your topic sociological, how to phrase your interest as a research question, and how to get started once you have identified that question. In later chapters, we'll learn more about how to actually answer the questions you will have developed by the time you finish this chapter.

Once you have identified where you already are, there are two overarching questions you need to ask yourself: how do you *feel* about where you already are, and what do you *know* about where you already are?

How Do You Feel About Where You Already Are?

Once you have figured out where you already are (perhaps not spiritually—we sociologists can't help you there—but in terms of your interests and everyday activities), your next task is to ask yourself some important questions about the interest you've

identified. Your answers to these questions will help you decide whether your topic is one that will really work for a sociological research project.

Whether you begin by already having an interest in some topic or you decide you want to study something related to one of your hobbies or your everyday experiences, chances are good that you already have some opinions about your topic. As such, there are a few questions you should ask yourself to determine whether you should try to turn this topic into a research project.

Start by asking yourself how you feel about your topic. Be totally honest, and ask yourself whether you believe your perspective is the only valid one. Perhaps yours isn't the only perspective, but do you believe it is the wisest one? The most practical one? How do you feel about other perspectives on this topic? If you feel so strongly that certain findings would upset you or that either you would design a project to get only the answer *you* believe to be the best one or you might feel compelled to cover up findings that you don't like, then you need to choose a different topic. For example, one student wanted to find out whether there was any relationship between intelligence and political party affiliation. He was certain from the beginning that the members of his party were without a doubt the most intelligent. His strong opinion was not in and of itself the problem. However, the rage that he expressed when he was asked to consider how he might feel if he found that the opposing party's members were more intelligent than those of his party, combined with his utter refusal to grant that it was even a possibility, led him to decide that the topic was probably too near and dear for him to use it to conduct unbiased research.

Of course, just because you feel strongly about a topic does not mean that you should not study it. Sometimes the best topics to research are those about which you do feel strongly. What better way to stay motivated than to study something that you care about? I recently began a study of child-free adults—people who have made the explicit and intentional choice not to have or rear children—precisely because I'm a child-free adult myself.

Although I have strong opinions about my own child-free status, I also feel OK about having those ideas challenged. In fact, for me one of the most rewarding things about studying a topic that is relevant to my own life is learning new perspectives that had never occurred to me before collecting data on the topic. I believe that my own perspective is pretty solid, but I can also accept that other people will have perspectives that differ from my own. And I am certainly willing to report the variety of perspectives that I discover as I collect data on my topic.

If you feel prepared to accept all findings, even those that may be unflattering to or distinct from your personal perspective, then perhaps you should intentionally study a topic about which you have strong feelings. Sociology professor Kathleen Blee (2002)Blee, K. (2002). *Inside organized racism: Women and men of the hate movement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Blee, K. (1991). *Women of the klan: Racism and gender in the 1920s*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. has taken this route in her research. Blee studies hate movement participants, people whose racist ideologies she studies but does not share. You can read her accounts of this research in two of her most well-known publications, *Inside Organized Racism* and *Women of the Klan*. Blee's research is successful because she was willing to report her findings and observations honestly, even those with which she may have personally taken strong issue. However, if, after honest reflection, you decide that you cannot accept or share with others findings with which you disagree, then you should study a topic about which you feel less strongly.

What Do You Know About Where You Already Are?

Whether or not you feel strongly about your topic, you will also want to consider what you already know about it. There are many ways we know what we know. Perhaps your mother told you something is so. Perhaps it came to you in a dream. Perhaps you took a class last semester and learned something about your topic there. Or you may have read something about your topic in your local newspaper or in *People* magazine. Maybe you saw a special on Dateline NBC or heard Snookie discussing the topic with her friends on *Jersey Shore*. We discussed the strengths and weaknesses associated with some of these different sources of knowledge in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", and we'll talk about other sources of knowledge, such as prior research, a little later on. For now, take some time to think about what you know about your topic from any and all possible sources. Thinking about what you already know will help you identify any **biases** you may have, and it will help as you begin to frame a question about your topic.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Many researchers choose topics by considering their own personal experiences, knowledge, and interests.
- Researchers should be aware of and forthcoming about any strong feelings they might have about their research topics.
- There are benefits and drawbacks associated with studying a topic about which you already have some prior knowledge or experience. Researchers should be aware of and consider both.

EXERCISES

1. Do some brainstorming to try to identify some potential topics of interest. What have been your favorite classes in college thus far? What did you like about them? What did you learn in them? What extracurricular activities are you involved in? How do you enjoy spending your time when nobody is telling you what you should be doing?
2. Check out the website thesocietypages.org. This site summarizes work published in *Contexts*, sociology's public interest magazine. It also includes links to recent news stories featuring sociological work and a number of sociological insights that are likely to be of general interest. If you are having trouble identifying a topic of interest, this site could be of help.
3. Learn how other sociologists have started where they are by reading their blogs. A few worth reading include the following:
   - Sociological Images: http://thesocietypages.org/socimages
   - Sociology Improv: http://thesocietypages.org/improv
   - Public Criminology: http://thesocietypages.org/pubcrim
   - Sexuality and Society: http://thesocietypages.org/sexuality
   - Marx in Drag: http://marxindrag.com/Marxindrag/Blog/Blog.html
   - The Sociological Imagination: http://thesociologicalimagination.com
   - Scatterplot: http://scatter.wordpress.com

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1.3.3: Is It Empirical?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define empirical questions, and provide an example.
2. Define ethical questions, and provide an example.

Sociologists do, indeed, consider questions of ethics during the research process. These questions have to do with a researcher's behavior while gathering empirical data and reporting findings. But questions about sociologists' professional behavior are distinct from sociological research questions. When it comes to research questions, sociologists are best equipped to answer **empirical questions**—those that can be answered by real experience in the real world—as opposed to **ethical questions**—questions about which people have moral opinions and that may not be answerable in reference to the real world. While sociologists do study phenomena about which people have moral opinions, our job is to gather social facts about those phenomena, not to judge or determine morality.

Let's consider a specific example. Early in my senior year of college, I took a class on comparative perspectives in health care. We started in the United States and then traveled to Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to learn about how health care is administered in each country. One thing that struck me at the time was the differences in how funding for our health care system works compared to systems in the countries I visited. When I learned about how much our health care institutions depend on private donations to pay for needed equipment and facilities, I knew instantly what I would choose as the topic for a research project I had coming up that year. I wanted to learn what the most morally upstanding way to fund health care was—was it the US model or was it the European models I'd learned about?

I returned from my trip, visited my sociology advisor, and shared my research project idea. Much to my dismay, my advisor told me my question wasn't sociological. "Not sociological," I asked. But sociologists study inequality, I argued, and understanding the most morally upright way of administering health care certainly had something to do with issues of inequality. True, my advisor agreed. The problem was not with my topic per se but instead with my framing of the topic. I was asking an ethical question about health care when I should be asking an empirical question. He helped me tweak my research question to make it empirical by focusing not on the comparable morality of each approach to health care but instead on the process by which health care institutions in the United States obtain funding for needed equipment and facilities. While not as sweeping or as grand as I'd originally envisioned, my advisor's help in bringing me down to earth and helping me identify an empirical question about the topic led to a more sociological project than I might have otherwise conducted.

Not too long ago I had another opportunity to think about the differences between ethical and empirical questions. In 2008, I was interviewed by a writer working on a piece for *Marie Claire* magazine on men who are sexually harassed in the workplace by women (Voss, 2008).Voss, G. (2008, May 26). Women harassing men. *Marie Claire*. Retrieved from http://www.marieclaire.com/sex-love/relationship-issues/articles/women-harassing-men-1 Because I had published several scholarly articles on this topic (with several wonderful collaborators), the writer wanted me to assert a position about what she viewed as a new and terrible phenomenon. While I don't personally support the sexual harassment of anyone, woman *or* man, and even though I've been involved in the anti–sexual violence movement personally for many years, I wasn't able to give the reporter the juicy quote about my feelings on the subject that she seemed intent on eliciting from me. Why? Because I was interviewed as a sociologist, not as a concerned member of the community. What I *was* able to talk about were the empirical findings from my research, including the finding that the stigma of reporting harassment can be quite high for men because of the cultural stereotype that men enjoy any and all forms of sexual attention.

In order to help you better understand the difference between ethical and empirical questions, let's consider a topic about which people have moral opinions. How about SpongeBob SquarePants?Not familiar with SpongeBob SquarePants? You can learn more about him on Nickelodeon's site dedicated to all things SpongeBob: http://spongebob.nick.com. In early 2005, members of the conservative Christian group Focus on the FamilyFocus on the Family. (2005, January 26). Focus on SpongeBob. *Christianity Today*. Retrieved from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/januaryweb-only/34.0c.html denounced this seemingly innocuous cartoon character as "morally offensive" because they perceived his character to be one that promotes a "progay agenda." Focus on the Family supported their claim that SpongeBob is immoral by citing his appearance in a children's video designed to promote tolerance of all family forms (BBC News, 2005).BBC News. (2005, January 20). US right attacks SpongeBob video. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4190699.stm They also cited SpongeBob's regular hand-holding with his male sidekick Patrick as further evidence of his immorality.

So can we now conclude that SpongeBob SquarePants is immoral? Not so fast. While your mother or a newspaper or television reporter may provide an answer, a sociologist cannot. Questions of morality are ethical, not empirical. Of course, this doesn't mean that sociologists and other social scientists cannot study opinions about or social meanings surrounding SpongeBob SquarePants (Carter, 2010).In fact, a recent MA thesis examines representations of gender and relationships in the cartoon: Carter, A. C. (2010). *Constructing gender and relationships in "SpongeBob SquarePants": Who lives in a pineapple under the sea*. MA thesis, Department of Communication, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL. In fact, sociologists may be among the most qualified to gather empirical facts about people's moral opinions. We study humans after all, and as you will discover in the following chapters of this text, we are trained to utilize a variety of scientific data-collection techniques to understand patterns of human beliefs and behaviors. Using these techniques, we could find out how many people in the United States find SpongeBob morally reprehensible, but we could never learn, empirically, whether SpongeBob is in fact morally reprehensible.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Empirical questions are distinct from ethical questions.
- There are usually a number of ethical questions and a number of empirical questions that could be asked about any single topic.
- While sociologists may study topics about which people have moral opinions, their job is to gather empirical data about the social world.

EXERCISES

1. Think of some topic that interests you. Pose one ethical question about that topic. Now pose an empirical question about the same topic.
2. Read a few news articles about any controversial topic that interests you (e.g., immigration, gay marriage, health care reform, terrorism, welfare). Make a note of the ethical points or questions that are raised in the articles and compare them to the empirical points or questions that are mentioned. Which do you find most compelling? Why?

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1.3.4: Is It Sociological?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and describe the three key insights that make sociology unique.
2. Define social location.
3. Understand the difference between sociological research questions and those of other, similar disciplines.

What is sociology? If you can't answer that question, then it will be very difficult for you to conduct a sociological research project. It will also be very difficult to impress your friends with your sociology degree or to convince your parents or your partner that the sacrifices that helped put you through college were worthwhile. Even more, it could be quite a challenge to explain yourself and your qualifications to prospective employers if you cannot tell them simply and succinctly what it is you spent your college career studying. So let's take a moment to consider what sociology is exactly. First, we will attempt to define sociology, and then we will consider how sociology is similar to and different from other disciplines. This exercise should help as we begin to turn our empirical interests into sociological research questions.

What Is Sociology?

As noted in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", sociology is the scientific study of humans in groups. But let's go a little further and think about what makes sociology a unique discipline. There are several key insights that make sociology unique, and keeping these in mind will help you frame your research interest in a way that is sociological. First, sociologists recognize that who a person is and what he or she thinks and does is affected by the groups of which that person is a member. Second, sociologists accept that interaction takes place in a way that is patterned. Finally, sociologists acknowledge that while patterns are important, inconsistencies in patterns are equally important. By considering each of these key insights in a little more detail, we can begin to get a better grasp of what makes sociology unique and what makes the topics that sociologists study sociological.

As noted, sociologists recognize that who a person is and what he or she thinks and does is affected by the groups of which that person is a member. In particular, sociologists pay attention to how people's experiences may differ depending on aspects of their identities. To help yourself think sociologically, look around you as you are out and about. Do you see people of different racial or ethnic identities from you? Different genders? Different class statuses? How might their experiences differ from yours? How might the very experience you are having at that moment differ for you if *you* were different somehow? What if you weighed twice as much as you do right now? What if you had green hair instead of brown? Sociologists study what such identities and characteristics mean, how and by whom they are given meaning, how they work together with other meanings, and what the consequences are of those meanings. In other words, sociologists study how people's **social locations** shape their experiences and their place in society.

Sociologists also accept that social interaction is patterned. In fact, patterns exist even though the people involved in creating them may not have any conception of their contribution. Because sociologists are interested in aggregates, the individuals who collectively create patterns may be separated by many years or miles. As sociologists, however, we are trained to look for consistencies in social patterns across time and space. For example, societies all over the world have for many years created rules, socialized their members, and produced and distributed goods. It is the consistencies across such processes that sociologists aim to understand.

Of course, inconsistencies are just as important as patterns. When, for example, women began to enter the paid labor force in increasing numbers, sociologists became interested in what forces drove this change and what consequences individuals, families, employers, and societies might see as a result (Wolfbein & Jaffe, 1946).Interestingly, one of the earliest pieces from the *American Sociological Review* investigating such demographic changes in labor force participation was published in 1946 following the unprecedented influx of women into the labor force during World War II. Questions about how gender and work are intertwined are now so common in sociology that many campuses today offer gender and work courses, and the scholarly journal *Gender, Work, & Organization* was established in 1994 to distribute research on this topic alone.You can read more about this journal at its website: http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0968-6673&site=1. Similarly, when mating and dating patterns shifted to include online match services, sociologists did not ignore this new way that humans had found to partner. Instead, they took note of it and considered how it worked, who utilized this new method of matching, and its impact on dating patterns more generally. In fact, according to **Sociological Abstracts**, a database that indexes published sociological research (and which you'll read more about later on in this chapter), 31 peer-reviewed articles on online dating had been published as of August 2010. As recently as 2004, however, there were no sociological articles on online dating indexed by this database. The increase in

publications focusing on online dating very likely had something to do with the changing social landscape. In this case, societal changes, or inconsistencies, drove the sociological research.Want to learn more about the sociological perspective on online dating? Google the name “Pepper Schwartz.” Professor Schwartz is a sexologist and sociologist at the University of Washington whose sociological insights and observations have been featured in numerous magazines and newspapers including *Glamour* and the *New York Times* and on television shows such as *Oprah*. She is also the chief relationship expert for PerfectMatch.com, an online dating site.

What Is Not Sociology?

In addition to considering what sociology actually is as a way to help identify a sociological research topic, it is worth considering what sociology is not. While the differences between sociology and chemical engineering may be pretty clear, there are other **disciplines** with which sociology shares interests and the lines between these disciplines may get blurred at times. Thinking about sociology’s similarities to and differences from other disciplines can help us frame a research question that is indeed sociological.

For example, many students pursue double majors in sociology and psychology. While the two disciplines are complementary, they are not the same. Consider the topic of gang membership. While a psychologist may be interested in identifying what traumatic personal experiences or emotional state might drive a person to join a gang, a sociologist is more likely to examine whether there are patterns in terms of who joins gangs. Are members of some social classes more likely than others to join gangs? Does a person’s geographical location appear to play a role in determining the likelihood that he or she will join a gang? In other words, psychologists and sociologists share an interest in human behavior, but psychologists tend to focus on individuals while sociologists consider individuals within the context of the social groups to which they belong.

Philosophers and sociologists also share some common interests, including a desire to understand beliefs about the nature of good and bad. But while a philosopher might consider what general or logical principles make up a good or a bad society, a sociologist is more likely to study how specific social realities, such as the presence of gangs in a community, impact perceptions of that community as either good or bad. Other disciplines that share some overlapping interests with sociology include political science, economics, and history. The differences in approaches toward the study of gang membership between sociology and other similar disciplines are summarized in Table 1.3.4.1 "Sociology Compared to Similar Disciplines: The Study of Gangs"

Table 1.3.4.1: Sociology Compared to Similar Disciplines: The Study of Gangs

Sociology comparison	Psychology	Philosophy	Political science	Economics	History
Are members of some social classes more likely than others to join gangs?	What traumatic personal experiences or emotional states drive a person to join a gang?				
Focus: Individuals within the context of groups	*Focus:* Individuals				
How does the presence of gangs in a community affect perceptions of that community as good or bad?		What logical principles make up a good or a bad society?			
Focus: Empirical questions		*Focus:* Ethical questions			
How do laws focused on gangs impact different social groups?			How have laws focused on gangs developed?		
Focus: Relationships between law and other institutions/groups			*Focus:* Political processes in their own right		

Sociology comparison	Psychology	Philosophy	Political science	Economics	History
How does the presence of gangs influence the well-being of families and children in a community?				How does the presence of gangs influence a community's financial well-being?	
Focus: Relationships between economy and other institutions or groups				*Focus:* Economy in its own right	
How have structural changes in society shaped the ways that gang-related incidents occur and are handled?					How can we explain the origins and consequences of one specific gang-related incident?
Focus: Shifts in the patterns of social life					*Focus:* Specific historical events

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sociology is unique in its focus on the combination of social context, patterns, and social change.
- Though similar to several other disciplines, there are distinct features that separate sociology from each discipline with which it shares some similarities.

EXERCISES

1. Take a look around you the next time you are heading across campus or waiting in line at the grocery store or your favorite coffee shop. Think about how the very experience you are having in that moment may be different for those around you who are not like you. How might the amount of social space you take up differ if you were a different gender? How would a change in your physical capabilities alter your path across campus? Would you interpret the stares from the child sitting in her parents' cart at the grocery store differently if you were a different race? What do your answers to these questions tell you about your social location?
2. Think about all the classes you have taken over the course of your college career. What disciplines have you learned about? How are those disciplines similar to sociology? How do those disciplines differ from sociology? Now consider a topic that you might be interested in conducting research on. How would a sociologist think about your topic? How would a person studying another discipline approach your topic?

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1.3.5: Is It a Question?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and explain the five key features of a good research question.
2. Explain why it is important for sociologists to be focused when designing a research question.
3. Identify the differences between and provide examples of strong and weak research questions.

Now that you've thought about what topics interest you and identified a topic that is both empirical and sociological, you need to form a **research question** about that topic.For many researchers, forming hypotheses comes after developing one's research question. Here our focus is just on identifying a topic and a question. So what makes a good research question? First, it is generally written in the form of a question. To say that your research question is "child-free adults" or "students' knowledge about current events" or "movies" would not be correct. You need to frame a question about the topic that you wish to study. A good research question is also one that is well focused. Writing a well-focused question isn't really all that different from what the paparazzi do regularly. As a sociologist you need to be as clear and focused as those photographers who stalk Britney Spears to get that perfect shot of her while she waits in line at Starbucks. OK, maybe what we do as sociologists isn't exactly the same, but think about how the paparazzi get paid. They must take clear, focused photographs in order to get paid for what they do. Likewise, we will not hit the sociological jackpot of having our research published, read, or respected by our peers if we are not clear and focused. I'll say a little more about this after we consider three more features of good research questions.

In addition to being written in the form of a question and being well focused, a good research question is one that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. For example, if your interest is in gender norms, you *could* ask, "Does gender affect a person's shaving habits?" but you will have nothing left to say once you discover your yes or no answer. Instead, why not ask, "*How* or *to what extent* does gender affect a person's feelings about body hair?" By tweaking your question in this small way, you suddenly have a much more fascinating question and more to say as you attempt to answer it.

A good research question should also have more than one plausible answer. The student who studied the relationship between gender and body hair preferences had a specific interest in the impact of gender, but she also knew that preferences might vary on other dimensions. For example, she knew from her own experience that her more politically conservative friends were more likely to shave every day and more likely to only date other regular shavers. Thinking through the possible relationships between gender, politics, and shaving led that student to realize that there were many plausible answers to her questions about *how* gender affects a person's feelings about body hair. Because gender doesn't exist in a vacuum she, wisely, felt that she needed to take into account other characteristics that work together with gender to shape people's behaviors, likes, and dislikes. By doing this, the student took into account the third feature of a good research question: She considered relationships between several concepts. While she began with an interest in a single concept—body hair—by asking herself what other concepts (such as gender or political orientation) might be related to her original interest, she was able to form a question that considered the relationships *among* those concepts.

In sum, a good research question generally has the following features:

1. It is written in the form of a question.
2. It is clearly focused.
3. It is not a yes/no question.
4. It has more than one plausible answer.
5. It considers relationships among multiple concepts.

Sociologists as Paparazzi?

As noted earlier, there are some similarities between the goals of sociologists and those of the paparazzi. A few years ago, shortly before leaving on a trip to New Orleans, I received one of those letters that most of us professional sociologists both dread *and* receive on a pretty regular basis: a rejection letter. The letter informed me that the paper I had recently submitted, while timely and well written, was being rejected. Apparently the paper lacked focus. In particular, the research question around which the paper was organized was not well focused. As I began to think about how to better focus my research question, and why such focus was so important in the first place, I licked my wounds and boarded a plane to join couple of friends in the Big Easy.

When our taxi pulled up to our lodging in the French Quarter, we noticed the street was lined with cars—and with people who appeared to be living in those cars. On closer examination, we also noticed that most of the car dwellers had cameras, all with very

long, wide lenses. Our taxi driver explained that they were paparazzi who were there because Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were in town—and that their house was right next to the building where we'd be staying. As the titleholder to the world's longest crush on Brad Pitt, I was, needless to say, giddy.If you've found yourself asking what any of this has to do with research methods, fear not, we're getting there. But presumably there are others of you out there who, like me, won't complain about a brief diversion so long as it involves Brad Pitt.

One of my friends was giddy too—but not for the same reason as me. She decided that she would try to pay for her trip by taking the perfect photograph of Brad and Angelina and selling it to the highest bidder. She reasoned that the paparazzi had chosen our street because it must be the best location to photograph the superstars and their kids. In fact, we did see Brangelina a few times. Now I respect every person's right to privacy, be they my long-standing crush or anyone else. Thus each time we saw Brangelina and kids, I'd jump in front of the camera while my friend tried to snap the perfect shot. As a result, instead of focusing in on Brad and Angelina, her camera always focused on my head. Needless to say, my friend never got a shot worthy of selling to pay for her trip. She did, however, get several of shots of my gigantic melon (my mother didn't call me pumpkin head for nothing), with Brad, Angelina, and the kids usually blurred in the background. Figure 1.3.5.1 "Blocking the Shot" shows one such shot; Figure 1.3.5.2 "The Least-Blurry Photo My Friend Was Able to Get" shows the least-blurry photo she was able to get thanks to my sabotage.

Figure 1.3.5.1: *Blocking the Shot*

Figure 1.3.5.2: *The Least-Blurry Photo My Friend Was Able to Get*

So why am I sharing this story and these terribly unflattering photos? The point is that as a sociological researcher, your job is like that of the paparazzi. Just as the paparazzi don't get paid unless they point their camera in the right direction and focus in on their subjects in exactly the right way, you will not hit the sociological jackpot unless you aim your sociological lens in the right direction and clearly focus your research question. You could be the most eloquent writer in your class, or even in the world, but if the research question about which you are writing is unclear, your work will ultimately fall flat. As I learned right before my trip to New Orleans, a poorly focused research question trumps all. The good news is that much of this text is dedicated to learning how to write, and then answer, a good research question. We've done this throughout the text and will continue to do so by considering specific research questions that sociologists have successfully asked and answered in the past. We'll also do some brainstorming about questions that are of interest to you and consider ways of framing different questions about the same topic by exploring the variety of methodologies that sociologists use to answer their research questions.

Some Specific Examples

Throughout this chapter, you have seen a number of examples of research questions, and you've read about features that distinguish good sociological research questions from not-so-good questions. Putting all this advice together, let's take a look at a few more examples of possible sociological research questions and consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. Table 1.3.5.1 "Sample Sociological Research Questions: Strengths and Weaknesses" does just that. While reading the table, keep in mind that I have only noted what I view to be the most relevant strengths and weaknesses of each question. Certainly each question may have additional strengths and weaknesses not noted in the table. Also, it may interest you to know that the questions in Table 1.3.5.1 "Sample Sociological Research Questions: Strengths and Weaknesses" all come from undergraduate sociology student projects that I have either advised in the course of teaching sociological research methods or have become familiar with from sitting on undergraduate thesis committees. The work by thesis students is cited.

Table 1.3.5.1:Sample Sociological Research Questions: Strengths and Weaknesses

Sample question	Question's strengths	Question's weaknesses	Proposed alternative
Do children's books teach us about gender norms in our society?	Written as a question	Written as a yes/no	What (or how) do children's books teach us about gender norms in our society?
	Focused		
Why are some men such jerks?	Written as a question	Lacks theoretical grounding	Who supports sexist attitudes and why?
	Focused	Biased	
Does sexual maturity change depending on where you're from?	Written as a question	Unclear phrasing	How does knowledge about sex vary across different geographical regions?
		Written as a yes/no	
What is sex?	Written as a question	Too broadly focused	How do students' definitions of sex change as they age?
		Not clear whether question is sociological	

Sample question	Question's strengths	Question's weaknesses	Proposed alternative
		Does not consider relationships among concepts	
Do social settings and peers and where you live influence a college student's exercise and eating habits?	Written as a question	Lacks clarity	How does social setting influence a person's engagement in healthy behaviors?
	Considers relationships among multiple concepts	Unfocused	
		Written as a yes/no	
What causes people to ignore someone in need of assistance?	Written as a question		
	Socially relevant		
How do older workers cope with unemployment? (Steenburgh, 2010)Steenburgh, E. (2010). *Strategies of older workers reentering the workforce*. Honors college thesis, University of Maine, Orono, ME.	Written as a question		
	Focused		
	More than one plausible answer		
Why do so few college-aged men volunteer? (Bernstein, 2010)Bernstein, J. D. (2010). *"Well, he just lost man points in my book": The absence of first-year college male volunteerism*. Honors college thesis, University of Maine, Orono, ME.	Written as a question		
	Socially relevant		
	More than one plausible answer		
How have representations of race and gender in horror films changed over time? (Potvin, 2007)Potvin, S. (2007). *Representations of race and gender in 1970s*	Written as a question		

Sample question	Question's strengths	Question's weaknesses	Proposed alternative
horror films and their contemporary remakes. Honors college thesis, University of Maine, Orono, ME.	Considers relationships among multiple concepts		

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most strong sociological research questions have five key features: written in the form of a question, clearly focused, beyond yes/no, more than one plausible answer, and consider relationships among concepts.
- A poorly focused research question can lead to the demise of an otherwise well-executed study.

EXERCISES

1. Name a topic that interests you. Now keeping the features of a good research question in mind, come up with three possible research questions you could ask about that topic.
2. Discuss your topic with a friend or with a peer in your class. Ask that person what sorts of questions come to mind when he or she thinks about the topic. Also ask that person for advice on how you might better focus one or all the possible research questions you came up with on your own.

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1.3.6: Next Steps

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the aspects of feasibility that shape a researcher's ability to conduct research.
2. Describe Sociological Abstracts.
3. Discuss how and why abstracts might be useful at the early stages of a research project.

Now that you have thought about topics that interest you and you've learned how to frame those topics empirically, sociologically, and as questions, you have probably come up with a few potential research questions—questions to which you are dying to know the answers. However, even if you have identified the most brilliant research question ever, you are still not ready to begin conducting research. First, you'll need to think about and come up with a plan for your research design. As you prepare to design a sociological research project, your next step is to think about the feasibility of your research question and to make a visit to your campus library.

Feasibility

We learned about ethics and the limits posed by institutional review boards (IRBs) and disciplinary codes. Beyond ethics, there are a few practical matters related to feasibility that all researchers should consider before beginning a research project. Are you interested in better understanding the day-to-day experiences of maximum security prisoners? This sounds fascinating, but unless you plan to commit a crime that lands you in a maximum security prison, chances are good that you will not be able to gain access to this population. Perhaps your interest is in the inner workings of toddler peer groups. If you're much older than four or five, however, it might be tough for you to access even that sort of group. Your ideal research topic might require you to live on a chartered sailboat in the Bahamas for a few years, but unless you have unlimited funding, it will be difficult to make even that happen. The point, of course, is that while the *topics* about which sociological questions can be asked may seem limitless, there are limits to which aspects of topics we can study, or at least to the ways we can study them.

Assuming you can gain IRB approval to conduct research with the population that most interests you, do you know that that population will let you in? Researchers like Barrie Thorne (1993),Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. who study the behaviors of children, sometimes face this dilemma. In the course of her work, Professor Thorne has studied how children teach each other gender norms. She also studied how adults "gender" children, but here we'll focus on just the former aspect of her work. Thorne had to figure out how to study the interactions of elementary school children when they probably would not accept her as one of their own. They were also unlikely to be able to read and complete a written questionnaire. Since she could not join them or ask them to read and write on a written questionnaire, Thorne's solution was to watch the children. While this seems like a reasonable solution to the problem of not being able to actually enroll in elementary school herself, there is always the possibility that Thorne's observations differed from what they might have been had she been able to actually join a class. What this means is that a researcher's identity, in this case Thorne's age, might sometimes limit (or enhance) her or his ability to study a topic in the way that he or she most wishes to study it.Think about Laud Humphreys's research on the tearoom trade. Would he have been able to conduct this work if he had been a woman?

In addition to your personal or demographic characteristics that could shape what you are able to study or how you are able to study it, there are also the very practical matters of time and money. In terms of time, your personal time frame for conducting research may be the semester during which you are taking this class. Perhaps as an employee one day your employer will give you an even shorter timeline in which to conduct some research—or perhaps longer. How much time a researcher has to complete her or his work may depend on a number of factors and will certainly shape what sort of research that person is able to conduct. Money, as always, is also relevant. For example, your ability to conduct research while living on a chartered sailboat in the Bahamas may be hindered unless you have unlimited funds or win the lottery. And if you wish to conduct survey research, you may have to think about the fact that mailing paper surveys costs not only time but money—from printing them to paying for the postage required to mail them. Interviewing people face to face may require that you offer your research participants a cup of coffee or glass of lemonade while you speak with them. And someone has to pay for the drinks.

In sum, feasibility is always a factor when deciding what, where, when, and how to conduct research. Aspects of your own identity may play a role in determining what you can and cannot investigate, as will the availability of resources such as time and money.

Field Trip: Visit Your Library

Library research, typically one of the early stops along the way to conducting original research, is also an excellent next step as you begin your project. While it is common to brainstorm about topics first, examining the literature will help you hone your specific research question and design. We'll talk more about reading, evaluating, but at this early stage it is a good idea to familiarize yourself with the resources your library has to offer. This will help you learn what sorts of questions other sociologists have asked about an area that interests you.

One of the drawbacks (or joys, depending on your perspective) of being a researcher in the 21st century is that we can do much of our work without ever leaving the comfort of our recliners. This is certainly true of familiarizing yourself with the literature. Most libraries offer incredible online search options, including access to Sociological Abstracts, a database that summarizes published articles in most all, but especially the most prestigious, sociology journals. Now is the time to play around with Sociological Abstracts. You can learn more from your professor or librarian about how to access Sociological Abstracts from your particular campus. Once you've done so, take a look. Using a keyword search, find a few articles that cover topics similar to those that interest you. At this stage, simply reading an article's title and abstract (the short paragraph at the top of every article) will give you an idea about how sociologists frame questions about topics that are of interest to you. Hopefully, this in turn will give you some ideas about how you might phrase your research question.

Beyond searching the online resources, go visit your library, scan the shelves, and take a look at the most recent sociology journals the library has on display in its periodicals section. Walk through the social science stacks and peruse the books published by sociologists. This is where you're likely to find the most fascinating monographs reporting findings from sociologists' adventures in the field. Introduce yourself to the reference librarian. Being on her or his good side will serve you well as you begin your research project. Your reference librarian may also be able to recommend databases in addition to Sociological Abstracts that will introduce you to published social scientific research on your topic (e.g., Criminal Justice Abstracts, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Social Services Abstracts, and Women's Studies International).

Once you have had a chance to peruse the online resources available to you and to check out your library in person, you should be ready to begin thinking about actually designing a research project.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When thinking about the feasibility of their research questions, researchers should consider their own identities and characteristics along with any potential constraints related to time and money.
- Becoming familiar with your library and the resources it has to offer is an excellent way to prepare yourself for successfully conducting research.
- Perusing the abstracts of published scholarly work in your area of interest is an excellent way to familiarize yourself with the sorts of questions sociologists have asked about your topic.

EXERCISES

1. Take yourself on a field trip to your campus library. Find out where the journals are kept and page through a couple of the most recent issues of sociology journals, such as *American Sociological Review*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Inquiry*, *Gender & Society*, or *Criminology*, to name a few. Introduce yourself to your reference librarian and ask her or his advice on where to get started in searching for published articles on your topic. Walk through the stacks containing sociology monographs. Page through a few that interest you.
2. Log into Sociological Abstracts or whatever other database your library offers that indexes social scientific publications (you can ask your librarian for help). Search for articles on your topic of interest. Read the abstracts of a few of those articles and see if you can identify the research question being answered in each article.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Apply scientific steps to construct a hypothesis, select a methodology, and collect and analyze data.

2.1: Research Design

2.1.1: Goals of the Research Project

2.1.2: Qualitative or Quantitative? Some Specific Considerations

2.1.3: Triangulation

2.1.4: Components of a Research Project

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2.1: Research Design

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2.1.1: Goals of the Research Project

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand and describe the differences among exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research.
2. Define and provide an example of idiographic research.
3. Define and provide an example of nomothetic research.
4. Identify circumstances under which research would be defined as applied and compare those to circumstances under which research would be defined as basic.

A recent news story about college students' addictions to electronic gadgets (Lisk, 2011)Lisk, J. (2011). Addiction to our electronic gadgets. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/health/2011/03/01/hm.election.addiction.cnn?iref=allsearch describes findings from some current research by Professor Susan Moeller and colleagues from the University of Maryland (http://withoutmedia.wordpress.com). The story raises a number of interesting questions. Just what sorts of gadgets are students addicted to? How do these addictions work? Why do they exist, and who is most likely to experience them?

Sociological research is great for answering just these sorts of questions. But in order to answer our questions well, we must take care in designing our research projects. In this chapter, we'll consider what aspects of a research project should be considered at the beginning, including specifying the goals of the research, the components that are common across most research projects, and a few other considerations.

One of the first things to think about when designing a research project is what you hope to accomplish, in very general terms, by conducting the research. What do you hope to be able to say about your topic? Do you hope to gain a deep understanding of whatever phenomenon it is that you're studying, or would you rather have a broad, but perhaps less deep, understanding? Do you want your research to be used by policymakers or others to shape social life, or is this project more about exploring your curiosities? Your answers to each of these questions will shape your research design.

Exploration, Description, Explanation

You'll need to decide in the beginning phases whether your research will be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Each has a different purpose, so how you design your research project will be determined in part by this decision.

Researchers conducting **exploratory research** are typically at the early stages of examining their topics. These sorts of projects are usually conducted when a researcher wants to test the feasibility of conducting a more extensive study; he or she wants to figure out the lay of the land, with respect to the particular topic. Perhaps very little prior research has been conducted on this subject. If this is the case, a researcher may wish to do some exploratory work to learn what method to use in collecting data, how best to approach research subjects, or even what sorts of questions are reasonable to ask. A researcher wanting to simply satisfy his or her own curiosity about a topic could also conduct exploratory research. In the case of the study of college students' addictions to their electronic gadgets, a researcher conducting exploratory research on this topic may simply wish to learn more about students' use of these gadgets. Because these addictions seem to be a relatively new phenomenon, an exploratory study of the topic might make sense as an initial first step toward understanding it.

In my research on child-free adults, I was unsure what the results might be when first embarking on the study. There was very little empirical research on the topic, so the initial goal of the research was simply to get a better grasp of what child-free people's lives are like and how their decision to be child free shapes their relationships and everyday experiences. Conducting exploratory research on the topic was a necessary first step, both to satisfy my curiosity about the subject and to better understand the phenomenon and the research participants in order to design a larger, subsequent study.

Sometimes the goal of research is to describe or define a particular phenomenon. In this case, **descriptive research** would be an appropriate strategy. A descriptive study of college students' addictions to their electronic gadgets, for example, might aim to describe patterns in how use of gadgets varies by gender or college major or which sorts of gadgets students tend to use most regularly.

Researchers at the Princeton Review conduct descriptive research each year when they set out to provide students and their parents with information about colleges and universities around the United States (http://www.princetonreview.com). They describe the social life at a school, the cost of admission, and student-to-faculty ratios (to name just a few of the categories reported). Although

students and parents may be able to obtain much of this information on their own, having access to the data gathered by a team of researchers is much more convenient and less time consuming.

Market researchers also rely on descriptive research to tell them what consumers think of their products. In fact, descriptive research has many useful applications, and you probably rely on findings from descriptive research without even being aware that that is what you are doing.

Finally, sociological researchers often aim to explain why particular phenomena work in the way that they do. Research that answers "why" questions is referred to as **explanatory research**. In this case, the researcher is trying to identify the causes and effects of whatever phenomenon he or she is studying. An explanatory study of college students' addictions to their electronic gadgets might aim to understand why students become addicted. Does it have anything to do with their family histories? With their other extracurricular hobbies and activities? With whom they spend their time? An explanatory study could answer these kinds of questions.

There are numerous examples of explanatory social scientific investigations. For example, in a recent study, Dominique Simons and Sandy Wurtele (2010)Simons, D. A., & Wurtele, S. K. (2010). Relationships between parents' use of corporal punishment and their children's endorsement of spanking and hitting other children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 34*, 639–646. sought to discover whether receiving corporal punishment from parents led children to turn to violence in solving their interpersonal conflicts with other children. In their study of 102 families with children between the ages of 3 and 7, the researchers found that experiencing frequent spanking did, in fact, result in children being more likely to accept aggressive problem-solving techniques. Another example of explanatory research can be seen in Robert Faris and Diane Felmlee's research (2011; American Sociological Association, 2011)Faris, R., & Felmlee, D. (2011). Status struggles: Network centrality and gender segregation in same- and cross-gender aggression. *American Sociological Review, 76*, 48–73; the American Sociological Association wrote a press release summarizing findings from the study. You can read it at http://asanet.org/press/Press_Release_Popular_Kids_More_Likely_to_Torment_Peers.cfm. The study has also been covered by several media outlets: Pappas, S. (2011). Popularity increases aggression in kids, study finds. Retrieved from http://www.livescience.com/11737-popularity-increases-aggression-kids-study-finds.html on the connections between popularity and bullying. They found, from their study of 8th, 9th, and 10th graders in 19 North Carolina schools, that as adolescents' popularity increases, so, too, does their aggression.This pattern was found until adolescents reached the top 2% in the popularity ranks. After that, aggression declines.

Idiographic or Nomothetic?

Once you decide whether you will conduct exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory research, you will need to determine whether you want your research to be idiographic or nomothetic. A decision to conduct **idiographic research** means that you will attempt to explain or describe your phenomenon exhaustively. While you might have to sacrifice some breadth of understanding if you opt for an idiographic explanation, you will gain a much deeper, richer understanding of whatever phenomenon or group you are studying than you would if you were to pursue nomothetic research. A decision to conduct **nomothetic research**, on the other hand, means that you will aim to provide a more general, sweeping explanation or description of your topic. In this case, you sacrifice depth of understanding in favor of breadth of understanding.

Let's look at some specific examples. As a graduate student, I conducted an in-depth study of breast cancer activism (Blackstone, 2003).Blackstone, A. (2003). *Racing for the cure and taking back the night: Constructing gender, politics, and public participation in women's activist/volunteer work*. PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. To do so, I joined an organization of local activists and participated in just about every aspect of the organization over a period of about 18 months. Perhaps it goes without saying, but over the course of a year and a half of participant observation, I learned quite a bit about this organization and its members. In other words, the study revealed the particular idiosyncrasies of the group, but it did not reveal much about the inner workings of other breast cancer activist organizations. Armed with an in-depth understanding about this single group, the study made a contribution to knowledge about how activists operate. For one thing, the organization I observed happened to be one of the largest and most well known of its type at the time, and many other organizations in the movement looked to this organization for ideas about how to operate. Understanding how this model organization worked was important for future activist efforts in a variety of organizations. Further, the study revealed far more intimate details of the inner workings of an activist organization than had it, say, instead been a survey of the top 50 breast cancer organizations in the United States (though that would have been an interesting study as well).

My collaborative research on workplace sexual harassment (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004),Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2004). Sexual harassment as a gendered expression of power. *American Sociological Review, 69*, 64–92. on the other hand, aims to provide more sweeping descriptions and explanations. For this nomothetic research project, we mailed surveys to a large sample of young workers who look very much like their peers in terms of their jobs, social class background, gender, and other categories. Because of these similarities, we have been able to speak *generally* about what young workers' experiences with sexual harassment are like. In an idiographic study of the same topic, the research team might follow a few workers around every day for a long period of time or conduct a series of very detailed, and lengthy, interviews with 10 or 15 workers.

Applied or Basic?

Finally, you will need to decide what sort of contribution you hope to make with your research. Do you want others to be able to use your research to shape social life? If so, you may wish to conduct a study that policymakers could use to change or create a specific policy. Perhaps, on the other hand, you wish to conduct a study that will contribute to sociological theories or knowledge without having a specific applied use in mind. In the example of the news story on students' addictions to technological gadgets, an applied study of this topic might aim to understand how to treat such addictions. A basic study of the same topic, on the other hand, might examine existing theories of addiction and consider how this new type of addiction does or does not apply; perhaps your study could suggest ways that such theories may be tweaked to encompass technological addictions.

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", we learned about both applied and basic research. When designing your research project, think about where you envision your work fitting in on the applied–basic continuum. Recognize, however, that even basic research may ultimately be used for some applied purpose. Similarly, your applied research might not turn out to be applicable to the particular real-world social problem you were trying to solve, but it might better our theoretical understanding of some phenomenon. In other words, deciding now whether your research will be basic or applied doesn't mean that will be its sole purpose forever. Basic research may ultimately be applied, and applied research can certainly contribute to general knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to think in advance about what contribution(s) you hope to make with your research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Exploratory research is usually conducted when a researcher has just begun an investigation and wishes to understand her or his topic generally.
- Descriptive research is research that aims to describe or define the topic at hand.
- Explanatory research is research that aims to explain why particular phenomena work in the way that they do.
- Idiographic investigations are exhaustive; nomothetic investigations are more general.
- While researchers may start out having some idea about whether they aim to conduct applied or basic research, it is also important to keep in mind that applied research may contribute to basic understandings and that basic research may turn out to have some useful application.

EXERCISES

- Describe a scenario in which exploratory research might be the best approach. Similarly, describe a scenario in which descriptive and then explanatory research would be the preferred approach.
- Which are you more drawn to personally, applied or basic research? Why?

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2.1.2: Qualitative or Quantitative? Some Specific Considerations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the role of causality in quantitative research as compared to qualitative research.
2. Identify, define, and describe each of the three main criteria for causality.
3. Describe the difference between and provide examples of independent and dependent variables.
4. Define units of analysis and units of observation, and describe the two common errors people make when they confuse the two.
5. Define hypothesis, be able to state a clear hypothesis, and discuss the respective roles of quantitative and qualitative research when it comes to hypotheses.

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", we discussed the importance of understanding the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Because this distinction is relevant to how researchers design their projects, we'll revisit it here.

Causality

When designing a research project, how issues of causality are attended to will in part be determined by whether the researcher plans to collect qualitative or quantitative data. **Causality** refers to the idea that one event, behavior, or belief will result in the occurrence of another, subsequent event, behavior, or belief. In other words, it is about cause and effect.

In a qualitative study, it is likely that you will aim to acquire an idiographic understanding of the phenomenon that you are investigating. Using our example of students' addictions to electronic gadgets, a qualitative researcher might aim to understand the multitude of reasons that two roommates exhibit addictive tendencies when it comes to their various electronic devices. The researcher might spend time in the dorm room with them, watching how they use their devices, follow them to class and watch them there, observe them at the cafeteria, and perhaps even observe them during their free time. At the end of this very intensive, and probably exhausting, set of observations, the researcher should be able to identify some of the specific causes of each student's addiction. Perhaps one of the two roommates is majoring in media studies, and all her classes require her to have familiarity with and to regularly use a variety of electronic gadgets. Perhaps the other roommate has friends or family who live overseas, and she relies on a variety of electronic devices to communicate with them. Perhaps both students have a special interest in playing and listening to music, and their electronic gadgets help facilitate this hobby. Whatever the case, in a qualitative study that seeks idiographic understanding, a researcher would be looking to understand the plethora of reasons (or causes) that account for the behavior he or she is investigating.

In a quantitative study, on the other hand, a researcher is more likely to aim for a nomothetic understanding of the phenomenon that he or she is investigating. In this case, the researcher may be unable to identify the specific idiosyncrasies of individual people's particular addictions. However, by analyzing data from a much larger and more representative group of students, the researcher will be able to identify the most likely, and more general, factors that account for students' addictions to electronic gadgets. The researcher might choose to collect survey data from a wide swath of college students from around the country. He might find that students who report addictive tendencies when it comes to their gadgets also tend to be people who can identity which of Steven Seagal's movies he directed, are more likely to be men, and tend to engage in rude or disrespectful behaviors more often than nonaddicted students. It is possible, then, that these associations can be said to have some causal relationship to electronic gadget addiction. However, items that seem to be related are not necessarily causal. To be considered causally related in a nomothetic study, such as the survey research in this example, there are a few criteria that must be met.

The main criteria for causality have to do with plausibility, temporality, and spuriousness. Plausibility means that in order to make the claim that one event, behavior, or belief causes another, the claim has to make sense. For example, if we attend a series of lectures during which a student's incessant midclass texting or web surfing gets in the way of our ability to focus on the lecture, we might begin to wonder whether people who have a propensity to be rude are more likely to have a propensity to be addicted to their electronic gadgets (and therefore use them during class). However, the fact that there might be a relationship between general rudeness and gadget addiction does not mean that a student's rudeness could *cause* him to be addicted to his gadgets. In other words, just because there might be some **correlation** between two variables does not mean that a causal relationship between the two is really plausible.

The criterion of **temporality** means that whatever cause you identify must precede its effect in time. As noted earlier, a survey researcher examining the causes of students' electronic gadget addictions might find that more men than women exhibit addictive

tendencies when it comes to their electronic gadgets. Thus the researcher has found a correlation between gender and addiction. So does this mean that a person's gadget addiction determines his or her gender? Probably not, not only because this doesn't make any sense but also because a person's gender identity is most typically formed long before he or she is likely to own any electronic gadgets. Thus gender precedes electronic gadget ownership (and subsequent addiction) in time.

Finally, a **spurious relationship** is one in which an association between two variables appears to be causal but can in fact be explained by some third variable. In the example of a survey assessing students' addictions to electronic gadgets, the researcher might have found that those who can identify which of Steven Seagal's films the actor himself directed also exhibit addiction to their electronic gadgets.In case you're curious, a visit to the Internet Movie Database will tell you that Seagal directed just one of his films, 1994's *On Deadly Ground*: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000219.

So does knowledge about Seagal's directorial prowess cause gadget addiction? Probably not. A more likely explanation is that being a man makes a person both more likely to know about Seagal's films and more likely to be addicted to electronic gadgets. In other words, there is a third variable that explains the relationship between Seagal movie knowledge and electronic gadget addiction.

Let's consider a few additional, real-world examples of spuriousness. Did you know, for example, that high rates of ice cream sales have been shown to cause drowning? Of course that's not really true, but there is a positive relationship between the two. In this case, the third variable that causes both high ice cream sales and increased deaths by drowning is time of year, as the summer season sees increases in both (Babbie, 2010).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Here's another good one: it is true that as the salaries of Presbyterian ministers in Massachusetts rise, so, too, does the price of rum in Havana, Cuba. Well, duh, you might be saying to yourself. Everyone knows how much ministers in Massachusetts love their rum, right? Not so fast. Both salaries and rum prices have increased, true, but so has the price of just about everything else (Huff & Geis, 1993).Huff, D., & Geis, I. (1993). *How to lie with statistics*. New York, NY: Norton. Finally, research shows that the more firefighters present at a fire, the more damage is done at the scene. What this statement leaves out, of course, is that as the size of a fire increases so, too, does the amount of damage caused as does the number of firefighters called on to help (Frankfort-Nachmias & Leon-Guerro, 2011).Frankfort-Nachmias, C., & Leon-Guerro, A. (2011). *Social statistics for a diverse society* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. In each of these examples, it is the presence of a third variable that explains the apparent relationship between the two original variables.

In sum, the following criteria must be met in order for a correlation to be considered causal:

1. The relationship must be plausible.
2. The cause must precede the effect in time.
3. The relationship must be nonspurious.

What we've been talking about here is relationships between variables. When one variable causes another, we have what researchers call independent and dependent variables. In the example where gender was found to be causally linked to electronic gadget addiction, gender would be the independent variable and electronic gadget addiction would be the dependent variable. An **independent variable** is one that causes another. A **dependent variable** is one that is caused by another. Dependent variables depend on independent variables.

Relationship strength is another important factor to take into consideration when attempting to make causal claims if your research approach is nomothetic. I'm not talking strength of your friendships or marriage (though of course that sort of strength *might* affect your likelihood to keep your friends or stay married). In this context, relationship strength refers to statistical significance. The more statistically significant a relationship between two variables is shown to be, the greater confidence we can have in the strength of that relationship. For now, keep in mind that for a relationship to be considered causal, it cannot exist simply because of the chance selection of participants in a study.

Some research methods, such as those used in qualitative and idiographic research, are not conducive to making predictions about when events or behaviors will occur. In these cases, what we are instead able to do is gain some understanding of the circumstances under which those causal relationships occur: to understand the *how* of causality. Qualitative research sometimes relies on quantitative work to point toward a relationship that may be interesting to investigate further. For example, if a quantitative researcher learns that men are statistically more likely than women to become addicted to their electronic gadgets, a qualitative researcher may decide to conduct some in-depth interviews and observations of men and women to learn more about how the different contexts and circumstances of men's and women's lives might shape their respective chances of becoming addicted. In other words, the qualitative researcher works to understand the contexts in which various causes and effects occur.

Units of Analysis and Units of Observation

Another point to consider when designing a research project, and which might differ slightly in qualitative and quantitative studies, has to do with **units of analysis** and **units of observation**. These two items concern what you, the researcher, actually observe in the course of your data collection and what you hope to be able to say about those observations. A unit of analysis is the entity that you wish to be able to say something about at the end of your study, probably what you'd consider to be the main focus of your study. A unit of observation is the item (or items) that you actually observe, measure, or collect in the course of trying to learn something about your unit of analysis. In a given study, the unit of observation might be the same as the unit of analysis, but that is not always the case. Further, units of analysis are not required to be the same as units of observation. What is required, however, is for researchers to be clear about how they define their units of analysis and observation, both to themselves and to their audiences.

More specifically, your unit of analysis will be determined by your research question. Your unit of observation, on the other hand, is determined largely by the method of data collection that you use to answer that research question. We'll take a closer look at methods of data collection in Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis". For now, let's go back to the example we've been discussing over the course of this chapter, students' addictions to electronic gadgets. We'll consider first how different kinds of research questions about this topic will yield different units of analysis. Then we'll think about how those questions might be answered and with what kinds of data. This leads us to a variety of units of observation.

If we were to ask, "Which students are most likely to be addicted to their electronic gadgets?" our unit of analysis would be the individual. We might mail a survey to students on campus, and our aim would be to classify individuals according to their membership in certain social classes in order to see how membership in those classes correlated with gadget addiction. For example, we might find that majors in new media, men, and students with high socioeconomic status are all more likely than other students to become addicted to their electronic gadgets. Another possibility would be to ask, "How do students' gadget addictions differ, and how are they similar?" In this case, we could conduct observations of addicted students and record when, where, why, and how they use their gadgets. In both cases, one using a survey and the other using observations, data are collected from individual students. Thus the unit of observation in both examples is the individual. But the units of analysis differ in the two studies. In the first one, our aim is to describe the characteristics of individuals. We may then make generalizations about the populations to which these individuals belong, but our unit of analysis is still the individual. In the second study, we will observe individuals in order to describe some social phenomenon, in this case, types of gadget addictions. Thus our unit of analysis would be the social phenomenon.

Another common unit of analysis in sociological inquiry is groups. Groups of course vary in size, and almost no group is too small or too large to be of interest to sociologists. Families, friendship groups, and street gangs make up some of the more common microlevel groups examined by sociologists. Employees in an organization, professionals in a particular domain (e.g., chefs, lawyers, sociologists), and members of clubs (e.g., Girl Scouts, Rotary, Red Hat Society) are all mesolevel groups that sociologists might study. Finally, at the macro level, sociologists sometimes examine citizens of entire nations or residents of different continents or other regions.

A study of student addictions to their electronic gadgets at the group level might consider whether certain types of social clubs have more or fewer gadget-addicted members than other sorts of clubs. Perhaps we would find that clubs that emphasize physical fitness, such as the rugby club and the scuba club, have fewer gadget-addicted members than clubs that emphasize cerebral activity, such as the chess club and the sociology club. Our unit of analysis in this example is groups. If we had instead asked whether people who join cerebral clubs are more likely to be gadget-addicted than those who join social clubs, then our unit of analysis would have been individuals. In either case, however, our unit of observation would be individuals.

Organizations are yet another potential unit of analysis that social scientists might wish to say something about. As you may recall from your introductory sociology class, organizations include entities like corporations, colleges and universities, and even night clubs. At the organization level, a study of students' electronic gadget addictions might ask, "How do different colleges address the problem of electronic gadget addiction?" In this case, our interest lies not in the experience of individual students but instead in the campus-to-campus differences in confronting gadget addictions. A researcher conducting a study of this type might examine schools' written policies and procedures, so his unit of observation would be documents. However, because he ultimately wishes to describe differences across campuses, the college would be his unit of analysis.

Of course, it would be silly in a textbook focused on *social* scientific research to neglect *social* phenomena as a potential unit of analysis. I mentioned one such example earlier, but let's look more closely at this sort of unit of analysis. Many sociologists study a variety of social interactions and social problems that fall under this category. Examples include social problems like murder or

rape; interactions such as counseling sessions, Facebook chatting, or wrestling; and other social phenomena such as voting and even gadget use or misuse. A researcher interested in students' electronic gadget addictions could ask, "What are the various types of electronic gadget addictions that exist among students?" Perhaps the researcher will discover that some addictions are primarily centered around social media such as chat rooms, Facebook, or texting while other addictions center on gadgets such as handheld, single-player video games or DVR devices that discourage interaction with others. The resultant typology of gadget addictions would tell us something about the social phenomenon (unit of analysis) being studied. As in several of the preceding examples, however, the unit of observation would likely be individual people.

Finally, a number of social scientists examine policies and principles, the last type of unit of analysis we'll consider here. Studies that analyze policies and principles typically rely on documents as the unit of observation. Perhaps a researcher has been hired by a college to help it write an effective policy against electronic gadget addiction. In this case, the researcher might gather all previously written policies from campuses all over the country and compare policies at campuses where addiction rates are low to policies at campuses where addiction rates are high.

In sum, there are many potential units of analysis that a sociologist might examine, but some of the most common units include the following:

1. Individuals
2. Groups
3. Organizations
4. Social phenomena
5. Policies and principles

Table 2.1.2.1 "Units of Analysis and Units of Observation: An Example Using a Hypothetical Study of Students' Addictions to Electronic Gadgets" includes a summary of the preceding discussion of units of analysis and units of observation.

Table 2.1.2.1:Units of Analysis and Units of Observation: An Example Using a Hypothetical Study of Students' Addictions to Electronic Gadgets

Research question	Unit of analysis	Data collection	Unit of observation	Statement of findings
Which students are most likely to be addicted to their electronic gadgets?	Individuals	Survey of students on campus	Individuals	New Media majors, men, and students with high socioeconomic status are all more likely than other students to become addicted to their electronic gadgets.
Do certain types of social clubs have more gadget-addicted members than other sorts of clubs?	Groups	Survey of students on campus	Individuals	Clubs with a scholarly focus, such as the sociology club and the math club, have more gadget-addicted members than clubs with a social focus, such as the 100-bottles-of-beer-on-the-wall club and the knitting club.
How do different colleges address the problem of electronic gadget addiction?	Organizations	Content analysis of policies	Documents	Campuses without strong computer science programs are more likely than those with such programs to expel students who have been found to have addictions to their electronic gadgets.
What are the various types of electronic gadget addictions that exist among students?	Social phenomena	Observations of students	Individuals	There are two main types of gadget addiction: social and antisocial.
What are the most effective policies against electronic gadget addiction?	Policies and principles	Content analysis of policies and student records	Documents	Policies that require students found to have an addiction to their electronic gadgets to attend group counseling for a minimum of one semester have been found to treat addictions more effectively than those that call for the expulsion of addicted students.
Note: Please don't forget that the findings described here are hypothetical. There is no reason to think that any of the hypothetical findings described here would actually bear out if tested with empirical research.				

One common error we see people make when it comes to both causality and units of analysis is something called the **ecological fallacy**. This occurs when claims about one lower-level unit of analysis are made based on data from some higher-level unit of analysis. In many cases, this occurs when claims are made about individuals, but only group-level data have been gathered. For example, we might want to understand whether electronic gadget addictions are more common on certain campuses than on others. Perhaps different campuses around the country have provided us with their campus percentage of gadget-addicted students, and we learn from these data that electronic gadget addictions are more common on campuses that have business programs than on campuses without them. We then conclude that business students are more likely than nonbusiness students to become addicted to their electronic gadgets. However, this would be an inappropriate conclusion to draw. Because we only have addiction rates by campus, we can only draw conclusions about campuses, not about the individual students on those campuses. Perhaps the sociology majors on the business campuses are the ones that caused the addiction rates on those campuses to be so high. The point is we simply don't know because we only have campus-level data. By drawing conclusions about students when our data are about campuses, we run the risk of committing the ecological fallacy.

On the other hand, another mistake to be aware of is **reductionism**. Reductionism occurs when claims about some higher-level unit of analysis are made based on data from some lower-level unit of analysis. In this case, claims about groups or macrolevel phenomena are made based on individual-level data. An example of reductionism can be seen in some descriptions of the civil rights movement. On occasion, people have proclaimed that Rosa Parks started the civil rights movement in the United States by refusing to give up her seat to a white person while on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955. Although it is true that Parks played an invaluable role in the movement, and that her act of civil disobedience gave others courage to stand up against racist policies, beliefs, and actions, to credit Parks with *starting* the movement is reductionist. Surely the confluence of many factors, from fights over legalized racial segregation to the Supreme Court's historic decision to desegregate schools in 1954 to the creation of groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (to name just a few), contributed to the rise and success of the American civil rights movement. In other words, the movement is attributable to many factors—some social, others political, others economic. Did Parks play a role? Of course she did—and a very important one at that. But did she *cause* the movement? To say yes would be reductionist.

It would be a mistake to conclude from the preceding discussion that researchers should avoid making any claims whatsoever about data or about relationships between variables. While it is important to be attentive to the possibility for error in causal reasoning about different levels of analysis, this warning should not prevent you from drawing well-reasoned analytic conclusions from your data. The point is to be cautious but not abandon entirely the social scientific quest to understand patterns of behavior.

Hypotheses

In some cases, the purpose of research is to test a specific hypothesis or hypotheses. At other times, researchers do not have predictions about what they will find but instead conduct research to answer a question or questions, with an open-minded desire to know about a topic, or to help develop hypotheses for later testing. A **hypothesis** is a statement, sometimes but not always causal, describing a researcher's expectation regarding what he or she anticipates finding. Often hypotheses are written to describe the expected relationship between two variables (though this is not a requirement). To develop a hypothesis, one needs to have an understanding of the differences between independent and dependent variables and between units of observation and units of analysis. Hypotheses are typically drawn from theories and usually describe how an independent variable is expected to affect some dependent variable or variables. Researchers following a deductive approach to their research will hypothesize about what they expect to find based on the theory or theories that frame their study. If the theory accurately reflects the phenomenon it is designed to explain, then the researcher's hypotheses about what he or she will observe in the real world should bear out.

Let's consider a couple of examples. In my collaborative research on sexual harassment (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004),Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2004). Sexual harassment as a gendered expression of power. *American Sociological Review, 69*, 64–92. we once hypothesized, based on feminist theories of sexual harassment, that "more females than males will experience specific sexually harassing behaviors." What is the causal relationship being predicted here? Which is the independent and which is the dependent variable? In this case, we hypothesized that a person's sex (independent variable) would predict her or his likelihood to experience sexual harassment (dependent variable).

Sometimes researchers will hypothesize that a relationship will take a specific direction. As a result, an increase or decrease in one area might be said to cause an increase or decrease in another. For example, you might choose to study the relationship between age and legalization of marijuana. Perhaps you've done some reading in your crime and deviance class and, based on the theories you've read, you hypothesize that "age is negatively related to support for marijuana legalization."In fact, there are empirical data that support this hypothesis. Gallup has conducted research on this very question since the 1960s. For more on their findings, see

Carroll, J. (2005). Who supports marijuana legalization? Retrieved from http://www.gallup.com/poll/19561/who-supports-marijuana-legalization.aspx What have you just hypothesized? You have hypothesized that as people get older, the likelihood of their supporting marijuana legalization decreases. Thus as age (your independent variable) moves in one direction (up), support for marijuana legalization (your dependent variable) moves in another direction (down). If writing hypotheses feels tricky, it is sometimes helpful to draw them out. Figure 2.1.2.1 "Hypothesis Describing the Expected Relationship Between Sex and Sexual Harassment" and Figure 2.1.2.2 "Hypothesis Describing the Expected Direction of Relationship Between Age and Support for Marijuana Legalization" depict each of the two hypotheses we have just discussed.

Figure 2.1.2.1: Components of Information Systems. Image by Ly-Huong Pham is licensed under CC BY NC

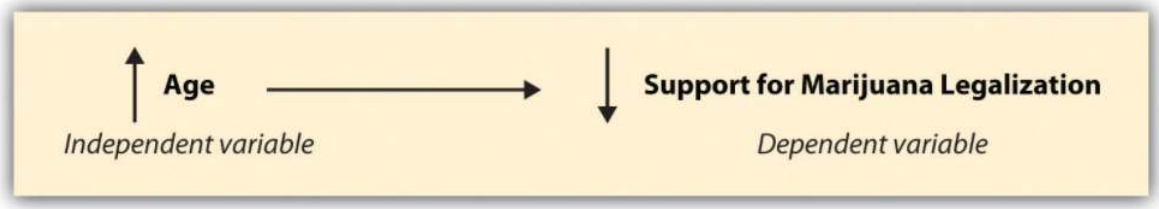

Figure 2.1.2.2: Components of Information Systems. Image by Ly-Huong Pham is licensed under CC BY NC

Note that you will almost never hear researchers say that they have proven their hypotheses. A statement that bold implies that a relationship has been shown to exist with absolute certainty and that there is no chance that there are conditions under which the hypothesis would not bear out. Instead, researchers tend to say that their hypotheses have been supported (or not). This more cautious way of discussing findings allows for the possibility that new evidence or new ways of examining a relationship will be discovered. Researchers may also discuss a **null hypothesis**, one that predicts no relationship between the variables being studied. If a researcher rejects the null hypothesis, he or she is saying that the variables in question are somehow related to one another.

Quantitative and qualitative researchers tend to take different approaches when it comes to hypotheses. In quantitative research, the goal often is to empirically test hypotheses generated from theory. With a qualitative approach, on the other hand, a researcher may begin with some vague expectations about what he or she will find, but the aim is not to test one's expectations against some empirical observations. Instead, theory development or construction is the goal. Qualitative researchers may develop theories from which hypotheses can be drawn and quantitative researchers may then test those hypotheses. Both types of research are crucial to understanding our social world, and both play an important role in the matter of hypothesis development and testing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In qualitative studies, the goal is generally to understand the multitude of causes that account for the specific instance the researcher is investigating.
- In quantitative studies, the goal may be to understand the more general causes of some phenomenon rather than the idiosyncrasies of one particular instance.
- Quantitative research may point qualitative research toward general causal relationships that are worth investigating in more depth.
- In order for a relationship to be considered causal, it must be plausible and nonspurious, and the cause must precede the effect in time.
- A unit of analysis is the item you wish to be able to say something about at the end of your study while a unit of observation is the item that you actually observe.
- When researchers confuse their units of analysis and observation, they may be prone to committing either the ecological fallacy or reductionism.
- Hypotheses are statements, drawn from theory, which describe a researcher's expectation about a relationship between two or more variables.

- Qualitative research may point quantitative research toward hypotheses that are worth investigating.

EXERCISES

1. Do a Google News search for the term *ecological fallacy*. Chances are good you'll come across a number of news editorials using this term. Read a few of these editorials or articles, and print one out. Demonstrate your understanding of the term *ecological fallacy* by writing a short answer discussing whether the author of the article you printed out used the term correctly.
2. Pick two variables that are of interest to you (e.g., age and religiosity, gender and college major, geographical location and preferred sports). State a hypothesis that specifies what you expect the relationship between those two variables to be. |

2.1.2: Qualitative or Quantitative? Some Specific Considerations is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

2.1.3: Triangulation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define triangulation.
2. Provide an example of triangulation.
3. Understand the benefits of triangulation.

Up to this point, we have discussed research design as though it is an either/or proposition. Either you will collect qualitative data or you will collect quantitative data. Either your approach will be idiographic or it will be nomothetic. In truth, you don't necessarily have to choose one approach over another. In fact, some of the most highly regarded social scientific investigations combine approaches in an effort to gain the most complete understanding of their topic possible. Using a combination of multiple and different research strategies is called **triangulation**.

Think about the examples we've discussed of potential studies of electronic gadget addiction. Now imagine that you could conduct two, or even three, of those studies instead of just one. What if you could conduct a survey of students on campus, a content analysis of campus policies, *and* observations of students in their natural environments (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1989)?Triangulation isn't just about using multiple strategies of data collection. Triangulation of measures occurs when researchers use multiple approaches to measure a single variable. Triangulation of theories occurs when researchers rely on multiple theories to help explain a single event or phenomenon. If you'd like to learn more about triangulation, the following sources may be of interest: Brewer, J., & Hunter, A. (1989). *Multimethod research: A synthesis of styles*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Aside from being pretty exhausted, and possibly broke, you'd probably end up with a fairly comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of, and campus responses to, students' electronic gadget addictions. And certainly a more comprehensive understanding is better than a less comprehensive one. The drawback, of course, is that you may not have the resources, because of either limited time or limited funding, to conduct such a wide-ranging study.

At this stage, you may be telling yourself (or screaming at me) that it would be nearly impossible to conduct all these studies yourself. You have a life, after all. The good news is that you don't necessarily have to do everything on your own in order to take advantage of the analytic benefits of triangulation. Perhaps someone already has conducted a large survey of the topic you wish to study. You could find out how those results compare with your one-on-one interviews with people on the same topic. Or perhaps you wish to administer a survey to test the generality of some findings that have been reached through the use of field methods. Whatever the case, don't forget about all the good research that has come before you that can help strengthen your investigation. Also keep in mind that qualitative and quantitative research methods can be complementary. Triangulation is one way to take advantage of the best in both approaches.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Triangulation refers to using multiple research strategies in a single research project.
- Triangulation allows researchers to take advantage of the strengths of various methods and at the same time work to overcome some of each method's weaknesses.

EXERCISES

1. Select one of the potential research topics you identified while reading Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project". Discuss how you might study the topic if triangulation were your goal.
2. Working with the same topic in mind, find two different sociological studies of the same topic. How do the two studies complement each other? Are there ways in which the weaknesses in one study are overcome in the other?

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2.1.4: Components of a Research Project

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe useful strategies to employ when searching for literature.
2. Describe why sociologists review prior literature and how they organize their literature reviews.
3. Identify the main sections contained in scholarly journal articles.
4. Identify and describe the major components researchers need to plan for when designing a research project.

In this section, we'll examine the most typical components that make up a research project, bringing in a few additional components to those we have already discussed. Keep in mind that our purpose at this stage is simply to provide a general overview of research design. The specifics of each of the following components will vary from project to project. Further, the stage of a project at which each of these components comes into play may vary. In later chapters, we will consider more specifically how these components work differently depending on the research method being employed.

Searching for Literature

Familiarizing yourself with research that has already been conducted on your topic is one of the first stages of conducting a research project and is crucial for coming up with a good research design. But where to start? How to start? In Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", you learned about some of the most common databases that house information about published sociological research. As you search for literature, you may have to be fairly broad in your search for articles.

I'm guessing you may feel you've heard enough about electronic gadget addiction in this chapter, so let's consider a different example here. On my campus, much to the chagrin of a group of student smokers, smoking was recently banned. These students were so upset by the idea that they would no longer be allowed to smoke on university grounds that they staged several smoke-outs during which they gathered in populated areas around campus and enjoyed a puff or two together.

A student in my research methods class wanted to understand what motivated this group of students to engage in activism centered around what she perceived to be, in this age of smoke-free facilities, a relatively deviant act. Were the protesters otherwise politically active? How much effort and coordination had it taken to organize the smoke-outs? The student researcher began her research by attempting to familiarize herself with the literature on her topic. Yet her search in Sociological Abstracts for "college student activist smoke-outs," yielded no results. Concluding there was no prior research on her topic, she informed me that she would need an alternative assignment to the **annotated bibliography** I required since there was no literature for her to review. How do you suppose I responded to this news? What went wrong with this student's search for literature?

In her first attempt, the student had been too narrow in her search for articles. But did that mean she was off the hook for completing the annotated bibliography assignment? Absolutely not. Instead, she went back to Sociological Abstracts and searched again using different combinations of search terms. Rather than searching for "college student activist smoke-outs" she tried, among other sets of terms, "college student activism." This time her search yielded a great many articles. Of course, they were not focused on prosmoking activist efforts, but they were focused on her population of interest, college students, and on her broad topic of interest, activism. I suggested that reading articles on college student activism might give her some idea about what other researchers have found in terms of what motivates college students to become involved in activist efforts. I also suggested she could play around with her search terms and look for research on activism centered on other sorts of activities that are perceived by some as deviant, such as marijuana use or veganism. In other words, she needed to be broader in her search for articles.

While this student found success by broadening her search for articles, her reading of those articles needed to be narrower than her search. Once she identified a set of articles to review by searching broadly, it was time to remind herself of her specific research focus: college student activist smoke-outs. Keeping in mind her particular research interest while reviewing the literature gave her the chance to think about how the theories and findings covered in prior studies might or might not apply to her particular point of focus. For example, theories on what motivates activists to get involved might tell her something about the likely reasons the students *she* planned to study got involved. At the same time, those theories might not cover all the particulars of student participation in smoke-outs. Thinking about the different theories then gave the student the opportunity to focus her research plans and even to develop a few hypotheses about what she thought she was likely to find.

Reviewing the Literature

Developing an annotated bibliography is often one of the early steps that researchers take as they begin to familiarize themselves with prior research on their topic. A second step involves a literature review in which a researcher positions his or her work within the context of prior scholarly work in the area. A literature review addresses the following matters: What sorts of questions have other scholars asked about this topic? What do we already know about this topic? What questions remain? As the researcher answers these questions, he or she synthesizes what is contained in the literature, possibly organizing prior findings around themes that are relevant to his or her particular research focus.

I once advised an undergraduate student who conducted a research project on speciesism, the belief that some species are superior to or have more value and rights than others. Her research question was “Why and how do humans construct divisions between themselves and animals?” This student organized her review of literature around the two parts of her research question: the why and the how. In the “why” section of her literature review, she described prior research that addressed questions of why humans are sometimes speciesist. She organized subsections around the three most common answers that were presented in the scholarly literature. She used the same structure in the “how” section of her literature review, arranging subsections around the answers posed in previous literature about *how* humans construct divisions between themselves and animals. This organizational scheme helped readers understand what we already know about the topic and what theories we rely on to help make sense of the topic. In addition, by also highlighting what we still don’t know, it helped the student set the stage for her own empirical research on the topic.

The preceding discussion about how to organize a review of scholarly literature assumes that we all know how to read scholarly literature. Yes, yes, I understand that you must know how to read. But reading scholarly articles can be a bit more challenging than reading a textbook. Here are a few pointers about how to do it successfully. First, it is important to understand the various sections that are typically contained in scholarly journals’ reports of empirical research. One of the most important and easiest to spot sections of a journal article is its **abstract**, the short paragraph at the beginning of an article that summarizes the author’s research question, methods used to answer the question, and key findings. The abstract may also give you some idea about the theoretical proclivities of the author. As a result, reading the abstract gives you both a framework for understanding the rest of the article and the punch line. It tells you what the author(s) found and whether the article is relevant to your area of inquiry.

After the abstract, most journal articles will contain the following sections (although exact section names are likely to vary): introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. Of course, there will also be a list of references cited,Lists of references cited are a useful source for finding additional literature in an area. and there may be a few tables, figures, or appendices at the end of the article as well. While you should get into the habit of familiarizing yourself with articles you wish to cite *in their entirety*, there are strategic ways to read journal articles that can make them a little easier to digest. Once you have read the abstract and determined that this is an article you’d like to read in full, read through the discussion section at the end of the article next. Because your own review of literature is likely to emphasize findings from previous literature, you should make sure that you have a clear idea about what those findings are. Reading an article’s discussion section helps you understand what the author views as the study’s major findings and how the author perceives those findings to relate to other research.

As you read through the rest of the article, think about the elements of research design that we have covered in this chapter. What approach does the researcher take? Is the research exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory? Is it inductive or deductive? Idiographic or nomothetic? Qualitative or quantitative? What claims does the author make about causality? What are the author’s units of analysis and observation? Use what you have learned in this chapter about the promise and potential pitfalls associated with each of these research elements to help you responsibly read and understand the articles you review. Future chapters of this text will address other elements of journal articles, including choices about measurement, sampling, and research method. As you learn about these additional items, you will increasingly gain more knowledge that you can apply as you read and critique the scholarly literature in your area of inquiry.

Additional Important Components

Thinking about the overarching goals of your research project and finding and reviewing the existing literature on your topic are two of the initial steps you’ll take when designing a research project. Forming a clear research question, as discussed in Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", is another crucial step. There are a number of other important research design components you’ll need to consider, and we will discuss those here.

At the same time that you work to identify a clear research question, you will probably also think about the overarching goals of your research project. Will it be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory? Will your approach be idiographic or nomothetic,

inductive or deductive? How you design your project might also be determined in part by whether you aim for your research to have some direct application or if your goal is to contribute more generally to sociological knowledge about your topic. Next, think about what your units of analysis and units of observation will be. These will help you identify the key concepts you will study. Once you have identified those concepts, you'll need to decide how to define them, and how you'll *know* that you're observing them when it comes time to collect your data. Defining your concepts, and knowing them when you see them, has to do with conceptualization and operationalization. Of course, you also need to know what approach you will take to collect your data. Thus identifying your research method is another important part of research design. You also need to think about who your research participants will be and what larger group(s) they may represent. Last, but certainly not least, you should consider any potential ethical concerns that could arise during the course of your research project. These concerns might come up during your data collection, but they might also arise when you get to the point of analyzing or sharing your research results.

Decisions about the various research components do not necessarily occur in sequential order. In fact, you may have to think about potential ethical concerns even before zeroing in on a specific research question. Similarly, the goal of being able to make generalizations about your population of interest could shape the decisions you make about your method of data collection. Putting it all together, the following list shows some of the major components you'll need to consider as you design your research project:

1. Research question
2. Literature review
3. Research strategy (idiographic or nomothetic, inductive or deductive)
4. Research goals (basic or applied)
5. Units of analysis and units of observation
6. Key concepts (conceptualization and operationalization)
7. Method of data collection
8. Research participants (sample and population)
9. Ethical concerns

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When identifying and reading relevant literature, be broad in your search *for* articles, but be narrower in your reading *of* articles.
- Writing an annotated bibliography can be a helpful first step to familiarize yourself with prior research in your area of interest.
- Literature reviews summarize and synthesize prior research.
- Literature reviews are typically organized around substantive ideas that are relevant to one's research question rather than around individual studies or article authors.
- When designing a research project, be sure to think about, plan for, and identify a research question, a review of literature, a research strategy, research goals, units of analysis and units of observation, key concepts, method(s) of data collection, population and sample, and potential ethical concerns.

EXERCISES

1. Find and read a complete journal article that addresses a topic that is of interest to you (perhaps using Sociological Abstracts, which is introduced in Chapter 3.1 "Beginning a Research Project"). In four to eight sentences, summarize the author's research question, theoretical framing, methods used, and major findings. Reread the article, and see how close you were in reporting these key elements. What did you understand and remember best? What did you leave out? What reading strategies may have helped you better recall relevant details from the article?
2. Using the example of students' electronic gadget addictions, design a hypothetical research project by identifying a plan for each of the nine components of research design that are presented in this section.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Differentiate between qualitative methods and quantitative methods as research tools and assess projects that might benefit from a mixed modality approach.

3.1: Survey Research- A Quantitative Technique

3.1.1: Chapter Introduction

3.1.2: Survey Research- What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

3.1.3: Pros and Cons of Survey Research

3.1.4: Types of Surveys

3.1.5: Designing Effective Questions and Questionnaires

3.1.6: Analysis of Survey Data

3.2: Interviews- Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

3.2.1: Chapter Introduction

3.2.2: Interview Research- What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

3.2.3: Qualitative Interview Techniques and Considerations

3.2.4: Quantitative Interview Techniques and Considerations

3.2.5: Issues to Consider for All Interview Types

3.3: Field Research- A Qualitative Technique

3.3.1: Chapter Introduction

3.3.2: Field Research- What Is It and When to Use It?

3.3.3: Pros and Cons of Field Research

3.3.4: Getting In

3.3.5: Field Notes

3.3.6: Analysis of Field Research Data

3.4: Unobtrusive Research- Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

3.4.1: Chapter Introduction

3.4.2: Unobtrusive Research- What Is It and When to Use It?

3.4.3: Pros and Cons of Unobtrusive Research

3.4.4: Unobtrusive Data Collected by You

3.4.5: Analyzing Others' Data

3.4.6: Reliability in Unobtrusive Research

3.5: Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

3.5.1: Focus Groups

3.5.2: Experiments

3.5.3: Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

3: Differentiate between qualitative methods and quantitative methods as research tools and assess projects that might benefit from a mixed modality approach. is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.1: Survey Research- A Quantitative Technique

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3.1.1: Chapter Introduction

Why Survey Research?

In 2008, the voters of the United States elected our first African American president, Barack Obama. It may not surprise you to learn that when President Obama was coming of age in the 1970s, one-quarter of Americans reported that they would not vote for a qualified African American presidential nominee. Three decades later, when President Obama ran for the presidency, fewer than 8% of Americans still held that position, and President Obama won the election (Smith, 2009).Smith, T. W. (2009). Trends in willingness to vote for a black and woman for president, 1972–2008. *GSS Social Change Report No. 55*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center. We know about these trends in voter opinion because the General Social Survey (http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website), a nationally representative survey of American adults, included questions about race and voting over the years described here. Without survey research, we may not know how Americans' perspectives on race and the presidency shifted over these years.

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3.1.2: Survey Research- What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define survey research.
2. Identify when it is appropriate to employ survey research as a data-collection strategy.

Most of you have probably taken a survey at one time or another, so you probably have a pretty good idea of what a survey is. Sometimes students in my research methods classes feel that understanding what a survey is and how to write one is so obvious, there's no need to dedicate any class time to learning about it. This feeling is understandable—surveys are very much a part of our everyday lives—we've probably all taken one, we hear about their results in the news, and perhaps we've even administered one ourselves. What students quickly learn is that there is more to constructing a good survey than meets the eye. Survey design takes a great deal of thoughtful planning and often a great many rounds of revision. But it is worth the effort. As we'll learn in this chapter, there are many benefits to choosing survey research as one's method of data collection. We'll take a look at what a survey is exactly, what some of the benefits and drawbacks of this method are, how to construct a survey, and what to do with survey data once one has it in hand.

Survey research is a quantitative method whereby a researcher poses some set of predetermined questions to an entire group, or sample, of individuals. Survey research is an especially useful approach when a researcher aims to describe or explain features of a very large group or groups. This method may also be used as a way of quickly gaining some general details about one's population of interest to help prepare for a more focused, in-depth study using time-intensive methods such as in-depth interviews or field research. In this case, a survey may help a researcher identify specific individuals or locations from which to collect additional data.

As is true of all methods of data collection, survey research is better suited to answering some kinds of research question more than others. In addition, operationalization works differently with different research methods. If your interest is in political activism, for example, you likely operationalize that concept differently in a survey than you would for a field research study of the same topic.

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Survey research is often used by researchers who wish to explain trends or features of large groups. It may also be used to assist those planning some more focused, in-depth study.

EXERCISE

1. Recall some of the possible research questions you came up with while reading previous chapters of this text. How might you frame those questions so that they could be answered using survey research?

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3.1.3: Pros and Cons of Survey Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and explain the strengths of survey research.
2. Identify and explain the weaknesses of survey research.

Survey research, as with all methods of data collection, comes with both strengths and weaknesses. We'll examine both in this section.

Strengths of Survey Method

Researchers employing survey methods to collect data enjoy a number of benefits. First, surveys are an excellent way to gather lots of information from many people. In my own study of older people's experiences in the workplace, I was able to mail a written questionnaire to around 500 people who lived throughout the state of Maine at a cost of just over $1,000. This cost included printing copies of my seven-page survey, printing a cover letter, addressing and stuffing envelopes, mailing the survey, and buying return postage for the survey. I realize that $1,000 is nothing to sneeze at. But just imagine what it might have cost to visit each of those people individually to interview them in person. Consider the cost of gas to drive around the state, other travel costs, such as meals and lodging while on the road, and the cost of time to drive to and talk with each person individually. We could double, triple, or even quadruple our costs pretty quickly by opting for an in-person method of data collection over a mailed survey. Thus surveys are relatively *cost effective*.

Related to the benefit of cost effectiveness is a survey's potential for *generalizability*. Because surveys allow researchers to collect data from very large samples for a relatively low cost, survey methods lend themselves to probability sampling techniques. Of all the data-collection methods described in this text, survey research is probably the best method to use when one hopes to gain a representative picture of the attitudes and characteristics of a large group.

Survey research also tends to be a *reliable* method of inquiry. This is because surveys are **standardized** in that the same questions, phrased in exactly the same way, are posed to participants. Other methods, such as qualitative interviewing, which we'll learn about in Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", do not offer the same consistency that a quantitative survey offers. This is not to say that all surveys are always reliable. A poorly phrased question can cause respondents to interpret its meaning differently, which can reduce that question's reliability. Assuming well-constructed question and questionnaire design, one strength of survey methodology is its potential to produce reliable results.

The **versatility** of survey research is also an asset. Surveys are used by all kinds of people in all kinds of professions. I repeat, surveys are used by all kinds of people in all kinds of professions. Is there a light bulb switching on in your head? I hope so. The versatility offered by survey research means that understanding how to construct and administer surveys is a useful skill to have for all kinds of jobs. Lawyers might use surveys in their efforts to select juries, social service and other organizations (e.g., churches, clubs, fundraising groups, activist groups) use them to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts, businesses use them to learn how to market their products, governments use them to understand community opinions and needs, and politicians and media outlets use surveys to understand their constituencies.

In sum, the following are benefits of survey research:

1. Cost-effective
2. Generalizable
3. Reliable
4. Versatile

Weaknesses of Survey Method

As with all methods of data collection, survey research also comes with a few drawbacks. First, while one might argue that surveys are flexible in the sense that we can ask any number of questions on any number of topics in them, the fact that the survey researcher is generally stuck with a single instrument for collecting data (the questionnaire), surveys are in many ways rather *inflexible*. Let's say you mail a survey out to 1,000 people and then discover, as responses start coming in, that your phrasing on a particular question seems to be confusing a number of respondents. At this stage, it's too late for a do-over or to change the question for the respondents who haven't yet returned their surveys. When conducting in-depth interviews, on the other hand, a

researcher can provide respondents further explanation if they're confused by a question and can tweak their questions as they learn more about how respondents seem to understand them.

Validity can also be a problem with surveys. Survey questions are standardized; thus it can be difficult to ask anything other than very general questions that a broad range of people will understand. Because of this, survey results may not be as valid as results obtained using methods of data collection that allow a researcher to more comprehensively examine whatever topic is being studied. Let's say, for example, that you want to learn something about voters' willingness to elect an African American president, as in our opening example in this chapter. General Social Survey respondents were asked, "If your party nominated an African American for president, would you vote for him if he were qualified for the job?" Respondents were then asked to respond either yes or no to the question. But what if someone's opinion was more complex than could be answered with a simple yes or no? What if, for example, a person was willing to vote for an African American woman but not an African American man?I am not at all suggesting that such a perspective makes any sense, but it is conceivable that an individual might hold such a perspective.

In sum, potential drawbacks to survey research include the following:

1. Inflexibility
2. Validity

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Strengths of survey research include its cost effectiveness, generalizability, reliability, and versatility.
- Weaknesses of survey research include inflexibility and issues with validity.

EXERCISES

1. What are some ways that survey researchers might overcome the weaknesses of this method?
2. Find an article reporting results from survey research (remember how to use Sociological Abstracts?). How do the authors describe the strengths and weaknesses of their study? Are any of the strengths or weaknesses described here mentioned in the article?

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3.1.4: Types of Surveys

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define cross-sectional surveys, provide an example of a cross-sectional survey, and outline some of the drawbacks of cross-sectional research.
2. Describe the various types of longitudinal surveys.
3. Define retrospective surveys, and identify their strengths and weaknesses.
4. Discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks of the various methods of delivering self-administered questionnaires.

There is much variety when it comes to surveys. This variety comes both in terms of *time*—when or with what frequency a survey is administered—and in terms of *administration*—how a survey is delivered to respondents. In this section we'll take a look at what types of surveys exist when it comes to both time and administration.

Time

In terms of time, there are two main types of surveys: cross-sectional and longitudinal. **Cross-sectional surveys** are those that are administered at just one point in time. These surveys offer researchers a sort of snapshot in time and give us an idea about how things are for our respondents at the particular point in time that the survey is administered. My own study of older workers mentioned previously is an example of a cross-sectional survey. I administered the survey at just one time.

Another example of a cross-sectional survey comes from Aniko Kezdy and colleagues' study (Kezdy, Martos, Boland, & Horvath-Szabo, 2011)Kezdy, A., Martos, T., Boland, V., & Horvath-Szabo, K. (2011). Religious doubts and mental health in adolescence and young adulthood: The association with religious attitudes. *Journal of Adolescence*, *34*, 39–47. of the association between religious attitudes, religious beliefs, and mental health among students in Hungary. These researchers administered a single, one-time-only, cross-sectional survey to a convenience sample of 403 high school and college students. The survey focused on how religious attitudes impact various aspects of one's life and health. The researchers found from analysis of their cross-sectional data that anxiety and depression were highest among those who had both strong religious beliefs and also some doubts about religion. Yet another recent example of cross-sectional survey research can be seen in Bateman and colleagues' study (Bateman, Pike, & Butler, 2011) of how the perceived publicness of social networking sites influences users' self-disclosures.Bateman, P. J., Pike, J. C., & Butler, B. S. (2011). To disclose or not: Publicness in social networking sites. *Information Technology & People*, *24*, 78–100. These researchers administered an online survey to undergraduate and graduate business students. They found that even though revealing information about oneself is viewed as key to realizing many of the benefits of social networking sites, respondents were less willing to disclose information about themselves as their perceptions of a social networking site's publicness rose. That is, there was a negative relationship between perceived publicness of a social networking site and plans to self-disclose on the site.

One problem with cross-sectional surveys is that the events, opinions, behaviors, and other phenomena that such surveys are designed to assess don't generally remain stagnant. Thus generalizing from a cross-sectional survey about the way things are can be tricky; perhaps you can say something about the way things were in the moment that you administered your survey, but it is difficult to know whether things remained that way for long after you administered your survey. Think, for example, about how Americans might have responded if administered a survey asking for their opinions on terrorism on September 10, 2001. Now imagine how responses to the same set of questions might differ were they administered on September 12, 2001. The point is not that cross-sectional surveys are useless; they have many important uses. But researchers must remember what they have captured by administering a cross-sectional survey; that is, as previously noted, a snapshot of life as it was at the time that the survey was administered.

One way to overcome this sometimes problematic aspect of cross-sectional surveys is to administer a longitudinal survey. **Longitudinal surveys** are those that enable a researcher to make observations over some extended period of time. There are several types of longitudinal surveys, including trend, panel, and cohort surveys. We'll discuss all three types here, along with another type of survey called retrospective. Retrospective surveys fall somewhere in between cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys.

The first type of longitudinal survey is called a **trend survey**. The main focus of a trend survey is, perhaps not surprisingly, trends. Researchers conducting trend surveys are interested in how people's inclinations change over time. The Gallup opinion polls are an excellent example of trend surveys. You can read more about Gallup on their website: http://www.gallup.com/Home.aspx. To learn

about how public opinion changes over time, Gallup administers the same questions to people at different points in time. For example, for several years Gallup has polled Americans to find out what they think about gas prices (something many of us happen to have opinions about). One thing we've learned from Gallup's polling is that price increases in gasoline caused financial hardship for 67% of respondents in 2011, up from 40% in the year 2000. Gallup's findings about trends in opinions about gas prices have also taught us that whereas just 34% of people in early 2000 thought the current rise in gas prices was permanent, 54% of people in 2011 believed the rise to be permanent. Thus through Gallup's use of trend survey methodology, we've learned that Americans seem to feel generally less optimistic about the price of gas these days than they did 10 or so years ago.You can read about these and other findings on Gallup's gasoline questions at http://www.gallup.com/poll/147632/Gas-Prices.aspx#1. It should be noted that in a trend survey, the same people are probably not answering the researcher's questions each year. Because the interest here is in trends, not specific people, as long as the researcher's sample is representative of whatever population he or she wishes to describe trends for, it isn't important that the same people participate each time.

Next are **panel surveys**. Unlike in a trend survey, in a panel survey the same people do participate in the survey each time it is administered. As you might imagine, panel studies can be difficult and costly. Imagine trying to administer a survey to the same 100 people every year for, say, 5 years in a row. Keeping track of where people live, when they move, and when they die takes resources that researchers often don't have. When they do, however, the results can be quite powerful. The Youth Development Study (YDS), administered from the University of Minnesota, offers an excellent example of a panel study. You can read more about the Youth Development Study at its website: http://www.soc.umn.edu/research/yds. Since 1988, YDS researchers have administered an annual survey to the same 1,000 people. Study participants were in ninth grade when the study began, and they are now in their thirties. Several hundred papers, articles, and books have been written using data from the YDS. One of the major lessons learned from this panel study is that work has a largely positive impact on young people (Mortimer, 2003).Mortimer, J. T. (2003). *Working and growing up in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Contrary to popular beliefs about the impact of work on adolescents' performance in school and transition to adulthood, work in fact increases confidence, enhances academic success, and prepares students for success in their future careers. Without this panel study, we may not be aware of the positive impact that working can have on young people.

Another type of longitudinal survey is a **cohort survey**. In a cohort survey, a researcher identifies some category of people that are of interest and then regularly surveys people who fall into that category. The same people don't necessarily participate from year to year, but all participants must meet whatever categorical criteria fulfill the researcher's primary interest. Common cohorts that may be of interest to researchers include people of particular generations or those who were born around the same time period, graduating classes, people who began work in a given industry at the same time, or perhaps people who have some specific life experience in common. An example of this sort of research can be seen in Christine Percheski's work (2008)Percheski, C. (2008). Opting out? Cohort differences in professional women's employment rates from 1960 to 2005. *American Sociological Review, 73*, 497–517. on cohort differences in women's employment. Percheski compared women's employment rates across seven different generational cohorts, from Progressives born between 1906 and 1915 to Generation Xers born between 1966 and 1975. She found, among other patterns, that professional women's labor force participation had increased across all cohorts. She also found that professional women with young children from Generation X had higher labor force participation rates than similar women from previous generations, concluding that mothers do not appear to be opting out of the workforce as some journalists have speculated (Belkin, 2003).Belkin, L. (2003, October 26). The opt-out revolution. *New York Times*, pp. 42–47, 58, 85–86.

All three types of longitudinal surveys share the strength that they permit a researcher to make observations over time. This means that if whatever behavior or other phenomenon the researcher is interested in changes, either because of some world event or because people age, the researcher will be able to capture those changes. Table 3.1.4.1 "Types of Longitudinal Surveys" summarizes each of the three types of longitudinal surveys.

Table 3.1.4.1: Types of Longitudinal Surveys

Sample type	Description
Trend	Researcher examines changes in trends over time; the same people do not necessarily participate in the survey more than once.
Panel	Researcher surveys the exact same sample several times over a period of time.
Cohort	Researcher identifies some category of people that are of interest and then regularly surveys people who fall into that category.

Finally, **retrospective surveys** are similar to other longitudinal studies in that they deal with changes over time, but like a cross-sectional study, they are administered only once. In a retrospective survey, participants are asked to report events from the past. By having respondents report past behaviors, beliefs, or experiences, researchers are able to gather longitudinal-like data without actually incurring the time or expense of a longitudinal survey. Of course, this benefit must be weighed against the possibility that people's recollections of their pasts may be faulty. Imagine, for example, that you're asked in a survey to respond to questions about where, how, and with whom you spent last Valentine's Day. As last Valentine's Day can't have been more than 12 months ago, chances are good that you might be able to respond accurately to any survey questions about it. But now let's say the research wants to know how last Valentine's Day compares to previous Valentine's Days, so he asks you to report on where, how, and with whom you spent the preceding six Valentine's Days. How likely is it that you will remember? Will your responses be as accurate as they might have been had you been asked the question each year over the past 6 years rather than asked to report on all years today?

In sum, when or with what frequency a survey is administered will determine whether your survey is cross-sectional or longitudinal. While longitudinal surveys are certainly preferable in terms of their ability to track changes over time, the time and cost required to administer a longitudinal survey can be prohibitive. As you may have guessed, the issues of time described here are not necessarily unique to survey research. Other methods of data collection can be cross-sectional or longitudinal—these are really matters of research design. But we've placed our discussion of these terms here because they are most commonly used by survey researchers to describe the type of survey administered. Another aspect of survey administration deals with how surveys are administered. We'll examine that next.

Administration

Surveys vary not just in terms of when they are administered but also in terms of how they are administered. One common way to administer surveys is in the form of **self-administered questionnaires**. This means that a research participant is given a set of questions, in writing, to which he or she is asked to respond. Self-administered questionnaires can be delivered in hard copy format, typically via mail, or increasingly more commonly, online. We'll consider both modes of delivery here.

Hard copy self-administered questionnaires may be delivered to participants in person or via snail mail. Perhaps you've take a survey that was given to you in person; on many college campuses it is not uncommon for researchers to administer surveys in large social science classes (as you might recall from the discussion in our chapter on sampling). In my own introduction to sociology courses, I've welcomed graduate students and professors doing research in areas that are relevant to my students, such as studies of campus life, to administer their surveys to the class. If you are ever asked to complete a survey in a similar setting, it might be interesting to note how your perspective on the survey and its questions could be shaped by the new knowledge you're gaining about survey research in this chapter.

Researchers may also deliver surveys in person by going door-to-door and either asking people to fill them out right away or making arrangements for the researcher to return to pick up completed surveys. Though the advent of online survey tools has made door-to-door delivery of surveys less common, I still see an occasional survey researcher at my door, especially around election time. This mode of gathering data is apparently still used by political campaign workers, at least in some areas of the country.

If you are not able to visit each member of your sample personally to deliver a survey, you might consider sending your survey through the mail. While this mode of delivery may not be ideal (imagine how much *less* likely you'd probably be to return a survey that didn't come with the researcher standing on your doorstep waiting to take it from you), sometimes it is the only available or the most practical option. As I've said, this may not be the most ideal way of administering a survey because it can be difficult to convince people to take the time to complete and return your survey.

Often survey researchers who deliver their surveys via snail mail may provide some advance notice to respondents about the survey to get people thinking about and preparing to complete it. They may also follow up with their sample a few weeks after their survey has been sent out. This can be done not only to remind those who have not yet completed the survey to please do so but also to thank those who have already returned the survey. Most survey researchers agree that this sort of follow-up is essential for improving mailed surveys' return rates (Babbie, 2010).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

In my own study of older workers' harassment experiences, people in the sample were notified in advance of the survey mailing via an article describing the research in a newsletter they received from the agency with whom I had partnered to conduct the survey. When I mailed the survey, a $1 bill was included with each in order to provide some incentive and an advance token of thanks to participants for returning the surveys. Two months after the initial mailing went out, those who were sent a survey were contacted

by phone. While returned surveys did not contain any identifying information about respondents, my research assistants contacted individuals to whom a survey had been mailed to remind them that it was not too late to return their survey and to say thank to those who may have already done so. Four months after the initial mailing went out, everyone on the original mailing list received a letter thanking those who had returned the survey and once again reminding those who had not that it was not too late to do so. The letter included a return postcard for respondents to complete should they wish to receive another copy of the survey. Respondents were also provided a telephone number to call and were provided the option of completing the survey by phone. As you can see, administering a survey by mail typically involves much more than simply arranging a single mailing; participants may be notified in advance of the mailing, they then receive the mailing, and then several follow-up contacts will likely be made after the survey has been mailed.

Earlier I mentioned online delivery as another way to administer a survey. This delivery mechanism is becoming increasingly common, no doubt because it is easy to use, relatively cheap, and may be quicker than knocking on doors or waiting for mailed surveys to be returned. To deliver a survey online, a researcher may subscribe to a service that offers online delivery or use some delivery mechanism that is available for free. SurveyMonkey offers both free and paid online survey services (http://www.surveymonkey.com). One advantage to using a service like SurveyMonkey, aside from the advantages of online delivery already mentioned, is that results can be provided to you in formats that are readable by data analysis programs such as SPSS, Systat, and Excel. This saves you, the researcher, the step of having to manually enter data into your analysis program, as you would if you administered your survey in hard copy format.

Many of the suggestions provided for improving the response rate on a hard copy questionnaire apply to online questionnaires as well. One difference of course is that the sort of incentives one can provide in an online format differ from those that can be given in person or sent through the mail. But this doesn't mean that online survey researchers cannot offer completion incentives to their respondents. I've taken a number of online surveys; many of these did not come with an incentive other than the joy of knowing that I'd helped a fellow social scientist do his or her job, but on one I was given a printable $5 coupon to my university's campus dining services on completion, and another time I was given a coupon code to use for $10 off any order on Amazon.com. I've taken other online surveys where on completion I could provide my name and contact information if I wished to be entered into a drawing together with other study participants to win a larger gift, such as a $50 gift card or an iPad.

Sometimes surveys are administered by having a researcher actually pose questions directly to respondents rather than having respondents read the questions on their own. These types of surveys are a form of interviews. We discuss interviews in Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", where we'll examine interviews of the survey (or quantitative) type and qualitative interviews as well. Interview methodology differs from survey research in that data are collected via a personal interaction. Because asking people questions in person comes with a set of guidelines and concerns that differ from those associated with asking questions on paper or online, we'll reserve our discussion of those guidelines and concerns for Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches".

Whatever delivery mechanism you choose, keep in mind that there are pros and cons to each of the options described here. While online surveys may be faster and cheaper than mailed surveys, can you be certain that every person in your sample will have the necessary computer hardware, software, and Internet access in order to complete your online survey? On the other hand, perhaps mailed surveys are more likely to reach your entire sample but also more likely to be lost and not returned. The choice of which delivery mechanism is best depends on a number of factors including your resources, the resources of your study participants, and the time you have available to distribute surveys and wait for responses. In my own survey of older workers, I would have much preferred to administer my survey online, but because so few people in my sample were likely to have computers, and even fewer would have Internet access, I chose instead to mail paper copies of the survey to respondents' homes. Understanding the characteristics of your study's population is key to identifying the appropriate mechanism for delivering your survey.

Main Points to Note About Freud's Psychosexual Theory

Freud believed that:

- Development in the early years has a lasting impact.
- There are three parts of the self: the id, the ego, and the superego
- People go through five stages of psychosexual development: the oral stage, the anal stage, the phallic stage, latency, and the genital stage

We study Freud because his assumptions the importance of early childhood experience provide a framework for later theories (the both elaborated and contradicted/challenged his work).

Main Points to Note About Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erikson was a student of Freud but focused on conscious thought.

- His stages of psychosocial development address the entire lifespan and suggest primary psychosocial crisis in some cultures that adults can use to understand how to support children's social and emotional development.
- The stages include: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair.

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3.1.5: Designing Effective Questions and Questionnaires

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the steps one should take in order to write effective survey questions.
2. Describe some of the ways that survey questions might confuse respondents and how to overcome that possibility.
3. Recite the two response option guidelines when writing closed-ended questions.
4. Define fence-sitting and floating.
5. Describe the steps involved in constructing a well-designed questionnaire.
6. Discuss why pretesting is important.

To this point we've considered several general points about surveys including when to use them, some of their pros and cons, and how often and in what ways to administer surveys. In this section we'll get more specific and take a look at how to pose understandable questions that will yield useable data and how to present those questions on your questionnaire.

Asking Effective Questions

The first thing you need to do in order to write effective survey questions is identify what exactly it is that you wish to know. As silly as it sounds to state what seems so completely obvious, I can't stress enough how easy it is to forget to include important questions when designing a survey. Let's say you want to understand how students at your school made the transition from high school to college. Perhaps you wish to identify which students were comparatively more or less successful in this transition and which factors contributed to students' success or lack thereof. To understand which factors shaped successful students' transitions to college, you'll need to include questions in your survey about all the possible factors that could contribute. Consulting the literature on the topic will certainly help, but you should also take the time to do some brainstorming on your own and to talk with others about what they think may be important in the transition to college. Perhaps time or space limitations won't allow you to include every single item you've come up with, so you'll also need to think about ranking your questions so that you can be sure to include those that you view as most important.

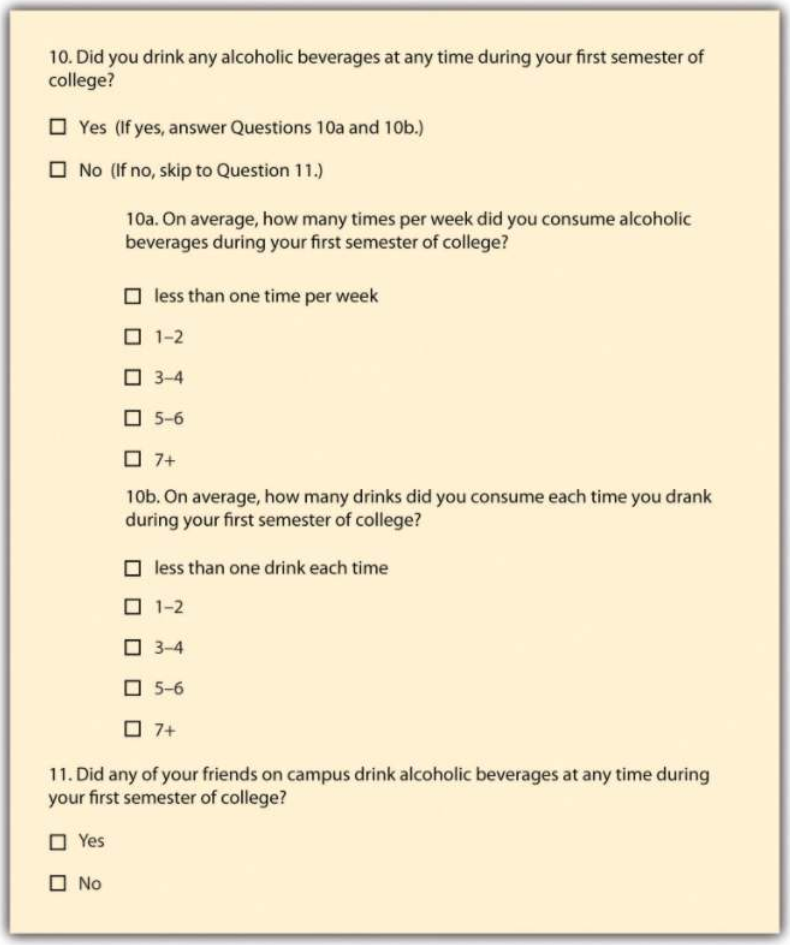
Although I have stressed the importance of including questions on all topics you view as important to your overall research question, you don't want to take an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach by uncritically including every possible question that occurs to you. Doing so puts an unnecessary burden on your survey respondents. Remember that you have asked your respondents to give you their time and attention and to take care in responding to your questions; show them your respect by only asking questions that you view as important.

Once you've identified all the topics about which you'd like to ask questions, you'll need to actually write those questions. Questions should be as clear and to the point as possible. This is not the time to show off your creative writing skills; a survey is a technical instrument and should be written in a way that is as direct and succinct as possible. As I've said, your survey respondents have agreed to give their time and attention to your survey. The best way to show your appreciation for their time is to not waste it. Ensuring that your questions are clear and not overly wordy will go a long way toward showing your respondents the gratitude they deserve.

Related to the point about not wasting respondents' time, make sure that every question you pose will be *relevant* to every person you ask to complete it. This means two things: first, that respondents have *knowledge* about whatever topic you are asking them about, and second, that respondents have *experience* with whatever events, behaviors, or feelings you are asking them to report. You probably wouldn't want to ask a sample of 18-year-old respondents, for example, how they would have advised President Reagan to proceed when news of the United States' sale of weapons to Iran broke in the mid-1980s. For one thing, few 18-year-olds are likely to have any clue about how to advise a president (nor does this 30-something-year-old). Furthermore, the 18-year-olds of today were not even alive during Reagan's presidency, so they have had no experience with the event about which they are being questioned. In our example of the transition to college, heeding the criterion of *relevance* would mean that respondents must understand what exactly you mean by "transition to college" if you are going to use that phrase in your survey and that respondents must have actually experienced the transition to college themselves.

If you decide that you do wish to pose some questions about matters with which only a portion of respondents will have had experience, it may be appropriate to introduce a **filter question** into your survey. A filter question is designed to identify some subset of survey respondents who are asked additional questions that are not relevant to the entire sample. Perhaps in your survey on the transition to college you want to know whether substance use plays any role in students' transitions. You may ask students

how often they drank during their first semester of college. But this assumes that all students drank. Certainly some may have abstained, and it wouldn't make any sense to ask the nondrinkers how often they drank. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable that drinking frequency may have an impact on someone's transition to college, so it is probably worth asking this question even if doing so violates the rule of relevance for some respondents. This is just the sort of instance when a filter question would be appropriate. You may pose the question as it is presented in Figure 3.1.5.1 "Filter Question".



10. Did you drink any alcoholic beverages at any time during your first semester of college?

☐ Yes (If yes, answer Questions 10a and 10b.)

☐ No (If no, skip to Question 11.)

10a. On average, how many times per week did you consume alcoholic beverages during your first semester of college?

☐ less than one time per week

☐ 1–2

☐ 3–4

☐ 5–6

☐ 7+

10b. On average, how many drinks did you consume each time you drank during your first semester of college?

☐ less than one drink each time

☐ 1–2

☐ 3–4

☐ 5–6

☐ 7+

11. Did any of your friends on campus drink alcoholic beverages at any time during your first semester of college?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Figure 3.1.5.1: *Filter Question*

There are some ways of asking questions that are bound to confuse a good many survey respondents. Survey researchers should take great care to avoid these kinds of questions. These include questions that pose double negatives, those that use confusing or culturally specific terms, and those that ask more than one question but are posed as a single question. Any time respondents are forced to decipher questions that utilize two forms of negation, confusion is bound to ensue. Taking the previous question about drinking as our example, what if we had instead asked, "Did you not drink during your first semester of college?" A response of no would mean that the respondent did actually drink—he or she did not *not* drink. This example is obvious, but hopefully it drives home the point to be careful about question wording so that respondents are not asked to decipher double negatives. In general, avoiding negative terms in your question wording will help to increase respondent understanding.Though this is generally true, some researchers argue that negatively worded questions should be integrated with positively worded questions in order to ensure that respondents have actually carefully read each question. See, for example, the following: Vaterlaus, M., & Higgenbotham, B. (2011). Writing survey questions for local program evaluations. Retrieved from http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/FC_Evaluation_2011-02pr.pdf

You should also avoid using terms or phrases that may be regionally or culturally specific (unless you are absolutely certain all your respondents come from the region or culture whose terms you are using). When I first moved to Maine from Minnesota, I was totally confused every time I heard someone use the word *wicked*. This term has totally different meanings across different regions of the country. I'd come from an area that understood the term wicked to be associated with evil. In my new home, however, *wicked* is used simply to put emphasis on whatever it is that you're talking about. So if this chapter is extremely

interesting to you, if you live in Maine you might say that it is “wicked interesting.” If you hate this chapter and you live in Minnesota, perhaps you’d describe the chapter simply as wicked. I once overheard one student tell another that his new girlfriend was “wicked athletic.” At the time I thought this meant he’d found a woman who used her athleticism for evil purposes. I’ve come to understand, however, that this woman is probably just exceptionally athletic. While *wicked* may not be a term you’re likely to use in a survey, the point is to be thoughtful and cautious about whatever terminology you do use.

Asking multiple questions as though they are a single question can also be terribly confusing for survey respondents. There’s a specific term for this sort of question; it is called a **double-barreled question**. Using our example of the transition to college, Figure 3.1.5.2 "Double-Barreled Question" shows a double-barreled question.

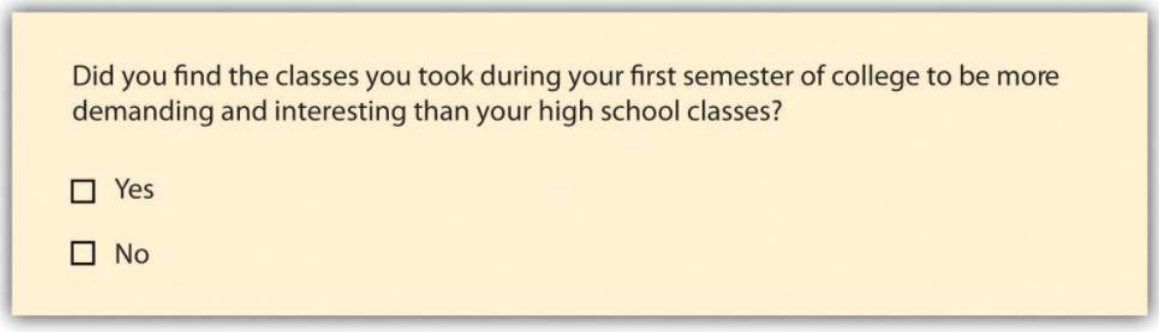


Figure 3.1.5.2: *Double-Barreled Question*

Do you see what makes the question double-barreled? How would someone respond if they felt their college classes were more demanding but also more boring than their high school classes? Or less demanding but more interesting? Because the question combines “demanding” and “interesting,” there is no way to respond yes to one criterion but no to the other.

Another thing to avoid when constructing survey questions is the problem of **social desirability**. We all want to look good, right? And we all probably know the politically correct response to a variety of questions whether we agree with the politically correct response or not. In survey research, social desirability refers to the idea that respondents will try to answer questions in a way that will present them in a favorable light. Perhaps we decide that to understand the transition to college, we need to know whether respondents ever cheated on an exam in high school or college. We all know that cheating on exams is generally frowned upon (at least I hope we all know this). So it may be difficult to get people to admit to cheating on a survey. But if you can guarantee respondents’ confidentiality, or even better, their anonymity, chances are much better that they will be honest about having engaged in this socially undesirable behavior. Another way to avoid problems of social desirability is to try to phrase difficult questions in the most benign way possible. Earl Babbie (2010)Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. offers a useful suggestion for helping you do this—simply imagine how you would feel responding to your survey questions. If you would be uncomfortable, chances are others would as well.

Finally, it is important to get feedback on your survey questions from as many people as possible, especially people who are like those in your sample. Now is not the time to be shy. Ask your friends for help, ask your mentors for feedback, ask your family to take a look at your survey as well. The more feedback you can get on your survey questions, the better the chances that you will come up with a set of questions that are understandable to a wide variety of people and, most importantly, to those in your sample.

In sum, in order to pose effective survey questions, researchers should do the following:

1. Identify what it is they wish to know.
2. Keep questions clear and succinct.
3. Make questions relevant to respondents.
4. Use filter questions when necessary.
5. Avoid questions that are likely to confuse respondents such as those that use double negatives, use culturally specific terms, or pose more than one question in the form of a single question.
6. Imagine how they would feel responding to questions.
7. Get feedback, especially from people who resemble those in the researcher’s sample.

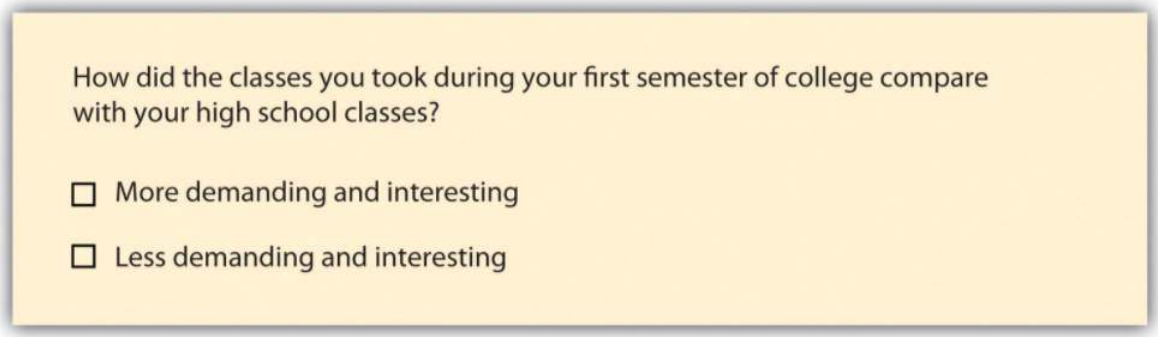
Response Options

While posing clear and understandable questions in your survey is certainly important, so, too, is providing respondents with unambiguous **response options**. Response options are the answers that you provide to the people taking your survey. Generally respondents will be asked to choose a single (or best) response to each question you pose, though certainly it makes sense in some cases to instruct respondents to choose multiple response options. One caution to keep in mind when accepting multiple responses to a single question, however, is that doing so may add complexity when it comes to tallying and analyzing your survey results.

Offering response options assumes that your questions will be **closed-ended questions**. In a quantitative written survey, which is the type of survey we've been discussing here, chances are good that most if not all your questions will be closed ended. This means that you, the researcher, will provide respondents with a limited set of options for their responses. To write an effective closed-ended question, there are a couple of guidelines worth following. First, be sure that your response options are *mutually exclusive*. Look back at Figure 3.1.5.1 "Filter Question", which contains questions about how often and how many drinks respondents consumed. Do you notice that there are no overlapping categories in the response options for these questions? This is another one of those points about question construction that seems fairly obvious but that can be easily overlooked. Response options should also be *exhaustive*. In other words, every possible response should be covered in the set of response options that you provide. For example, note that in question 10a in Figure 3.1.5.1 "Filter Question" we have covered all possibilities—those who drank, say, an average of once per month can choose the first response option ("less than one time per week") while those who drank multiple times a day each day of the week can choose the last response option ("7+"). All the possibilities in between these two extremes are covered by the middle three response options.

Surveys need not be limited to closed-ended questions. Sometimes survey researchers include **open-ended questions** in their survey instruments as a way to gather additional details from respondents. An open-ended question does not include response options; instead, respondents are asked to reply to the question in their own way, using their own words. These questions are generally used to find out more about a survey participant's experiences or feelings about whatever they are being asked to report in the survey. If, for example, a survey includes closed-ended questions asking respondents to report on their involvement in extracurricular activities during college, an open-ended question could ask respondents why they participated in those activities or what they gained from their participation. While responses to such questions may also be captured using a closed-ended format, allowing participants to share some of their responses in their own words can make the experience of completing the survey more satisfying to respondents and can also reveal new motivations or explanations that had not occurred to the researcher.

We discussed double-barreled questions, but response options can also be double barreled, and this should be avoided. Figure 3.1.5.3 "Double-Barreled Response Options" is an example of a question that uses double-barreled response options.


How did the classes you took during your first semester of college compare with your high school classes?

☐ More demanding and interesting

☐ Less demanding and interesting

Figure 3.1.5.3: *Double-Barreled Response Options*

Other things to avoid when it comes to response options include fence-sitting and floating. **Fence-sitters** are respondents who choose neutral response options, even if they have an opinion. This can occur if respondents are given, say, five rank-ordered response options, such as strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree. Some people will be drawn to respond "no opinion" even if they have an opinion, particularly if their true opinion is the nonsocially desirable opinion. **Floaters**, on the other hand, are those that choose a substantive answer to a question when really they don't understand the question or don't have an opinion. If a respondent is only given four rank-ordered response options, such as strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, those who have no opinion have no choice but to select a response that suggests they have an opinion.

As you can see, floating is the flip side of fence-sitting. Thus the solution to one problem is often the cause of the other. How you decide which approach to take depends on the goals of your research. Sometimes researchers actually want to learn something

about people who claim to have no opinion. In this case, allowing for fence-sitting would be necessary. Other times researchers feel confident their respondents will all be familiar with every topic in their survey. In this case, perhaps it is OK to force respondents to choose an opinion. There is no always-correct solution to either problem.

Finally, using a matrix is a nice way of streamlining response options. A **matrix** is a question type that that lists a set of questions for which the answer categories are all the same. If you have a set of questions for which the response options are the same, it may make sense to create a matrix rather than posing each question and its response options individually. Not only will this save you some space in your survey but it will also help respondents progress through your survey more easily. A sample matrix can be seen in Figure 3.1.5.4 "Survey Questions Utilizing Matrix Format".

Instructions: For each statement, please check whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree

My college classes are . . .	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
more demanding than my high school classes.	☐	☐	☐	☐
more interesting than my high school classes.	☐	☐	☐	☐
more interactive than my high school classes.	☐	☐	☐	☐
larger than my high school classes.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 3.1.5.4: *Survey Questions Utilizing Matrix Format*

Designing Questionnaires

In addition to constructing quality questions and posing clear response options, you'll also need to think about how to present your written questions and response options to survey respondents. Questions are presented on a **questionnaire**, the document (either hard copy or online) that contains all your survey questions that respondents read and mark their responses on. Designing questionnaires takes some thought, and in this section we'll discuss the sorts of things you should think about as you prepare to present your well-constructed survey questions on a questionnaire.

One of the first things to do once you've come up with a set of survey questions you feel confident about is to group those questions thematically. In our example of the transition to college, perhaps we'd have a few questions asking about study habits, others focused on friendships, and still others on exercise and eating habits. Those may be the themes around which we organize our questions. Or perhaps it would make more sense to present any questions we had about precollege life and habits and then present a series of questions about life after beginning college. The point here is to be deliberate about how you present your questions to respondents.

Once you have grouped similar questions together, you'll need to think about the order in which to present those question groups. Most survey researchers agree that it is best to begin a survey with questions that will want to make respondents continue (Babbie, 2010; Dillman, 2000; Neuman, 2003).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Wiley; Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson. In other words, don't bore respondents, but don't scare them away either. There's some disagreement over where on a survey to place demographic questions such as those about a person's age, gender, and race. On the one hand, placing them at the beginning of the questionnaire may lead respondents to think the survey is boring, unimportant, and not something they want to bother completing. On the other hand, if your survey deals with some very sensitive or difficult topic, such as child sexual abuse or other criminal activity, you don't want to scare respondents away or shock them by beginning with your most intrusive questions.

In truth, the order in which you present questions on a survey is best determined by the unique characteristics of your research—only you, the researcher, hopefully in consultation with people who are willing to provide you with feedback, can determine how best to order your questions. To do so, think about the unique characteristics of your topic, your questions, and most importantly, your sample. Keeping in mind the characteristics and needs of the people you will ask to complete your survey should help guide you as you determine the most appropriate order in which to present your questions.

You'll also need to consider the time it will take respondents to complete your questionnaire. Surveys vary in length, from just a page or two to a dozen or more pages, which means they also vary in the time it takes to complete them. How long to make your survey depends on several factors. First, what is it that you wish to know? Wanting to understand how grades vary by gender and year in school certainly requires fewer questions than wanting to know how people's experiences in college are shaped by demographic characteristics, college attended, housing situation, family background, college major, friendship networks, and extracurricular activities. Keep in mind that even if your research question requires a good number of questions be included in your questionnaire, do your best to keep the questionnaire as brief as possible. Any hint that you've thrown in a bunch of useless questions just for the sake of throwing them in will turn off respondents and may make them not want to complete your survey.

Second, and perhaps more important, how long are respondents likely to be willing to spend completing your questionnaire? If you are studying college students, asking them to use their precious fun time away from studying to complete your survey may mean they won't want to spend more than a few minutes on it. But if you have the endorsement of a professor who is willing to allow you to administer your survey in class, students may be willing to give you a little more time (though perhaps the professor will not). The time that survey researchers ask respondents to spend on questionnaires varies greatly. Some advise that surveys should not take longer than about 15 minutes to complete (cited in Babbie 2010),This can be found at http://www.worldopinion.com/the_frame/frame4.html, cited in Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. others suggest that up to 20 minutes is acceptable (Hopper, 2010).Hopper, J. (2010). How long should a survey be? Retrieved from http://www.verstaresearch.com/blog/how-long-should-a-survey-be As with question order, there is no clear-cut, always-correct answer about questionnaire length. The unique characteristics of your study and your sample should be considered in order to determine how long to make your questionnaire.

A good way to estimate the time it will take respondents to complete your questionnaire is through **pretesting**. Pretesting allows you to get feedback on your questionnaire so you can improve it before you actually administer it. Pretesting can be quite expensive and time consuming if you wish to test your questionnaire on a large sample of people who very much resemble the sample to whom you will eventually administer the finalized version of your questionnaire. But you can learn a lot and make great improvements to your questionnaire simply by pretesting with a small number of people to whom you have easy access (perhaps you have a few friends who owe you a favor). By pretesting your questionnaire you can find out how understandable your questions are, get feedback on question wording and order, find out whether any of your questions are exceptionally boring or offensive, and learn whether there are places where you should have included filter questions, to name just a few of the benefits of pretesting. You can also time pretesters as they take your survey. Ask them to complete the survey as though they were actually members of your sample. This will give you a good idea about what sort of time estimate to provide respondents when it comes time to actually administer your survey, and about whether you have some wiggle room to add additional items or need to cut a few items.

Perhaps this goes without saying, but your questionnaire should also be attractive. A messy presentation style can confuse respondents or, at the very least, annoy them. Be brief, to the point, and as clear as possible. Avoid cramming too much into a single page, make your font size readable (at least 12 point), leave a reasonable amount of space between items, and make sure all

instructions are exceptionally clear. Think about books, documents, articles, or web pages that you have read yourself—which were relatively easy to read and easy on the eyes and why? Try to mimic those features in the presentation of your survey questions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Brainstorming and consulting the literature are two important early steps to take when preparing to write effective survey questions.
- Make sure that your survey questions will be relevant to all respondents and that you use filter questions when necessary.
- Getting feedback on your survey questions is a crucial step in the process of designing a survey.
- When it comes to creating response options, the solution to the problem of fence-sitting might cause floating, whereas the solution to the problem of floating might cause fence sitting.
- Pretesting is an important step for improving one's survey before actually administering it.

EXERCISES

1. Do a little Internet research to find out what a Likert scale is and when you may use one.
2. Write a closed-ended question that follows the guidelines for good survey question construction. Have a peer in the class check your work (you can do the same for him or her!).

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3.1.6: Analysis of Survey Data

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define response rate, and discuss some of the current thinking about response rates.
2. Describe what a codebook is and what purpose it serves.
3. Define univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analysis.
4. Describe each of the measures of central tendency.
5. Describe what a contingency table displays.

This text is primarily focused on designing research, collecting data, and becoming a knowledgeable and responsible consumer of research. We won't spend as much time on data analysis, or what to do with our data once we've designed a study and collected it, but I will spend some time in each of our data-collection chapters describing some important basics of data analysis that are unique to each method. Entire textbooks could be (and have been) written entirely on data analysis. In fact, if you've ever taken a statistics class, you already know much about how to analyze quantitative survey data. Here we'll go over a few basics that can get you started as you begin to think about turning all those completed questionnaires into findings that you can share.

From Completed Questionnaires to Analyzable Data

It can be very exciting to receive those first few completed surveys back from respondents. Hopefully you'll even get more than a few back, and once you have a handful of completed questionnaires, your feelings may go from initial euphoria to dread. Data are fun and can also be overwhelming. The goal with data analysis is to be able to condense large amounts of information into usable and understandable chunks. Here we'll describe just how that process works for survey researchers.

As mentioned, the hope is that you will receive a good portion of the questionnaires you distributed back in a completed and readable format. The number of completed questionnaires you receive divided by the number of questionnaires you distributed is your **response rate**. Let's say your sample included 100 people and you sent questionnaires to each of those people. It would be wonderful if all 100 returned completed questionnaires, but the chances of that happening are about zero. If you're lucky, perhaps 75 or so will return completed questionnaires. In this case, your response rate would be 75% (75 divided by 100). That's pretty darn good. Though response rates vary, and researchers don't always agree about what makes a good response rate, having three-quarters of your surveys returned would be considered good, even excellent, by most survey researchers. There has been lots of research done on how to improve a survey's response rate. We covered some of these previously, but suggestions include personalizing questionnaires by, for example, addressing them to specific respondents rather than to some generic recipient such as "madam" or "sir"; enhancing the questionnaire's credibility by providing details about the study, contact information for the researcher, and perhaps partnering with agencies likely to be respected by respondents such as universities, hospitals, or other relevant organizations; sending out prequestionnaire notices and postquestionnaire reminders; and including some token of appreciation with mailed questionnaires even if small, such as a $1 bill.

The major concern with response rates is that a low rate of response may introduce **nonresponse bias** into a study's findings. What if only those who have strong opinions about your study topic return their questionnaires? If that is the case, we may well find that our findings don't at all represent how things really are or, at the very least, we are limited in the claims we can make about patterns found in our data. While high return rates are certainly ideal, a recent body of research shows that concern over response rates may be overblown (Langer, 2003).Langer, G. (2003). About response rates: Some unresolved questions. *Public Perspective*, May/June, 16–18. Retrieved from http://www.aapor.org/Content/aapor/Resources/PollampSurveyFAQ1/DoResponseRatesMatter/Response_Rates_-_Langer.pdf Several studies have shown that low response rates did not make much difference in findings or in sample representativeness (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2000; Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, & Craighill, 2006; Merkle & Edelman, 2002).Curtin, R., Presser, S., & Singer, E. (2000). The effects of response rate changes on the index of consumer sentiment. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *64*, 413–428; Keeter, S., Kennedy, C., Dimock, M., Best, J., & Craighill, P. (2006). Gauging the impact of growing nonresponse on estimates from a national RDD telephone survey. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *70*, 759–779; Merkle, D. M., & Edelman, M. (2002). Nonresponse in exit polls: A comprehensive analysis. In M. Groves, D. A. Dillman, J. L. Eltinge, & R. J. A. Little (Eds.), *Survey nonresponse* (pp. 243–258). New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons. For now, the jury may still be out on what makes an ideal response rate and on whether, or to what extent, researchers should be concerned about response rates. Nevertheless, certainly no harm can come from aiming for as high a response rate as possible.

Whatever your survey's response rate, the major concern of survey researchers once they have their nice, big stack of completed questionnaires is condensing their data into manageable, and analyzable, bits. One major advantage of quantitative methods such as survey research, as you may recall from Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", is that they enable researchers to describe large amounts of data because they can be represented by and condensed into numbers. In order to condense your completed surveys into analyzable numbers, you'll first need to create a **codebook**. A codebook is a document that outlines how a survey researcher has translated her or his data from words into numbers. An excerpt from the codebook I developed from my survey of older workers can be seen in Table 3.1.6.1 "Codebook Excerpt From Survey of Older Workers". The coded responses you see can be seen in their original survey format. As you'll see in the table, in addition to converting response options into

numerical values, a short variable name is given to each question. This shortened name comes in handy when entering data into a computer program for analysis.

Table 3.1.6.1: Codebook Excerpt From Survey of Older Workers

Variable #	Variable name	Question	Options
11	FINSEC	In general, how financially secure would you say you are?	1 = Not at all secure
			2 = Between not at all and moderately secure
			3 = Moderately secure
			4 = Between moderately and very secure
			5 = Very secure
12	FINFAM	Since age 62, have you ever received money from family members or friends to help make ends meet?	0 = No
			1 = Yes
13	FINFAMT	If yes, how many times?	1 = 1 or 2 times
			2 = 3 or 4 times
			3 = 5 times or more
14	FINCHUR	Since age 62, have you ever received money from a church or other organization to help make ends meet?	0 = No
			1 = Yes
15	FINCHURT	If yes, how many times?	1 = 1 or 2 times
			2 = 3 or 4 times
			3 = 5 times or more
16	FINGVCH	Since age 62, have you ever donated money to a church or other organization?	0 = No
			1 = Yes
17	FINGVFAM	Since age 62, have you ever given money to a family member or friend to help them make ends meet?	0 = No
			1 = Yes

If you've administered your questionnaire the old fashioned way, via snail mail, the next task after creating your codebook is data entry. If you've utilized an online tool such as SurveyMonkey to administer your survey, here's some good news—most online survey tools come with the capability of importing survey results directly into a data analysis program. Trust me—this is indeed most excellent news. (If you don't believe me, I highly recommend administering hard copies of your questionnaire next time around. You'll surely then appreciate the wonders of online survey administration.)

For those who will be conducting manual data entry, there probably isn't much I can say about this task that will make you want to perform it other than pointing out the reward of having a database of your very own analyzable data. We won't get into too many of the details of data entry, but I will mention a few programs that survey researchers may use to analyze data once it has been entered. The first is SPSS, or the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (http://www.spss.com). SPSS is a statistical analysis computer program designed to analyze just the sort of data quantitative survey researchers collect. It can perform everything from very basic descriptive statistical analysis to more complex inferential statistical analysis. SPSS is touted by many for being highly accessible and relatively easy to navigate (with practice). Other programs that are known for their accessibility include MicroCase (http://www.microcase.com/index.html), which includes many of the same features as SPSS, and Excel (http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/excel-help/about-statistical-analysis-tools-HP005203873.aspx), which is far less sophisticated in its statistical capabilities but is relatively easy to use and suits some researchers' purposes just fine. Check out the web pages for each, which I've provided links to in the chapter's endnotes, for more information about what each package can do.

Identifying Patterns

Data analysis is about identifying, describing, and explaining patterns. **Univariate analysis** is the most basic form of analysis that quantitative researchers conduct. In this form, researchers describe patterns across just one variable. Univariate analysis includes frequency distributions and measures of central tendency. A frequency distribution is a way of summarizing the distribution of responses on a single survey question. Let's look at the frequency distribution for just one variable from my older worker survey. We'll analyze the item mentioned first in the codebook excerpt given earlier, on respondents' self-reported financial security.

Table 3.1.6.2: Frequency Distribution of Older Workers' Financial Security

In general, how financially secure would you say you are?	Value	Frequency	Percentage
Label			
Not at all secure	1	46	25.6
Between not at all and moderately secure	2	43	23.9
Moderately secure	3	76	42.2
Between moderately and very secure	4	11	6.1
Very secure	5	4	2.2
Total valid cases = 180; no response = 3			

As you can see in the frequency distribution on self-reported financial security, more respondents reported feeling "moderately secure" than any other response category. We also learn from this single frequency distribution that fewer than 10% of respondents reported being in one of the two most secure categories.

Another form of univariate analysis that survey researchers can conduct on single variables is measures of central tendency. Measures of central tendency tell us what the most common, or average, response is on a question. Measures of central tendency can be taken for any level variable of those we learned from nominal to ratio. There are three kinds of measures of central tendency: modes, medians, and means. **Mode** refers to the most common response given to a question. Modes are most appropriate for nominal-level variables. A **median** is the middle point in a distribution of responses. Median is the appropriate measure of central tendency for ordinal-level variables. Finally, the measure of central tendency used for interval- and ratio-level variables is the mean. To obtain a **mean**, one must add the value of all responses on a given variable and then divide that number of the total number of responses.

In the previous example of older workers' self-reported levels of financial security, the appropriate measure of central tendency would be the median, as this is an ordinal-level variable. If we were to list all responses to the financial security question in order and then choose the middle point in that list, we'd have our median. In Figure 3.1.6.1 "Distribution of Responses and Median Value on Workers' Financial Security", the value of each response to the financial security question is noted, and the middle point within that range of responses is highlighted. To find the middle point, we simply divide the number of valid cases by two. The number of valid cases, 180, divided by 2 is 90, so we're looking for the 90th value on our distribution to discover the median. As you'll see in Figure 3.1.6.1 "Distribution of Responses and Median Value on Workers' Financial Security", that value is 3, thus the median on our financial security question is 3, or "moderately secure."

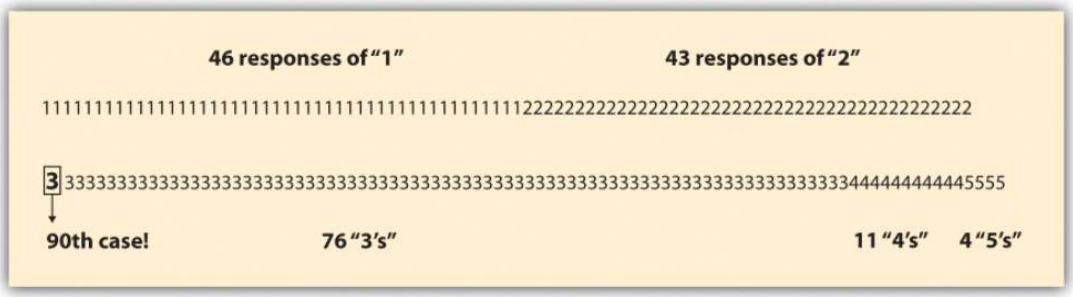

Figure 3.1.6.1: *Distribution of Responses and Median Value on Workers' Financial Security*

As you can see, we can learn a lot about our respondents simply by conducting univariate analysis of measures on our survey. We can learn even more, of course, when we begin to examine relationships *among* variables. Either we can analyze the relationships between two variables, called **bivariate analysis**, or we can examine relationships among more than two variables. This latter type of analysis is known as **multivariate analysis**.

Bivariate analysis allows us to assess **covariation** among two variables. This means we can find out whether changes in one variable occur together with changes in another. If two variables do not covary, they are said to have **independence**. This means simply that there is no relationship between the two variables in question. To learn whether a relationship exists between two variables, a researcher may **cross-tabulate** the two variables and present their relationship in a contingency table. A **contingency table** shows how variation on one variable may be contingent on variation on the other. Let's take a look at a contingency table. In Table 3.1.6.3 "Financial Security Among Men and Women Workers Age 62 and Up", I have cross-tabulated two questions from my older worker survey: respondents' reported gender and their self-rated financial security.

Table 3.1.6.3: Financial Security Among Men and Women Workers Age 62 and Up

	Men	Women
Not financially secure (%)	44.1	51.8
Moderately financially secure (%)	48.9	39.2
Financially secure (%)	7.0	9.0
Total	N = 43	N = 135

You'll see in Table 3.1.6.3 "Financial Security Among Men and Women Workers Age 62 and Up" that I collapsed a couple of the financial security response categories (recall that there were five categories presented in Table 3.1.6.2 "Frequency Distribution of Older Workers' Financial Security"; here there are just three). Researchers sometimes collapse response categories on items such as this in order to make it easier to read results in a table. You'll also see that I placed the variable "gender" in the table's columns and "financial security" in its rows. Typically, values that are contingent on other values are placed in rows (a.k.a. dependent variables), while independent variables are placed in columns. This makes comparing across categories of our independent variable pretty simple. Reading across the top row of our table, we can see that around 44% of men in the sample reported that they are not financially secure while almost 52% of women reported the same. In other words, more women than men reported that they are not financially secure. You'll also see in the table that I reported the total number of respondents for each category of the independent variable in the table's bottom row. This is also standard practice in a bivariate table, as is including a table heading describing what is presented in the table.

Researchers interested in simultaneously analyzing relationships among more than two variables conduct multivariate analysis. If I hypothesized that financial security declines for women as they age but increases for men as they age, I might consider adding age to the preceding analysis. To do so would require multivariate, rather than bivariate, analysis. We won't go into detail here about how to conduct multivariate analysis of quantitative survey items here, where we'll discuss strategies for reading and understanding tables that present multivariate statistics. If you are interested in learning more about the analysis of quantitative survey data, I recommend checking out your campus's offerings in statistics classes. The quantitative data analysis skills you will gain in a statistics class could serve you quite well should you find yourself seeking employment one day.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- While survey researchers should always aim to obtain the highest response rate possible, some recent research argues that high return rates on surveys may be less important than we once thought.
- There are several computer programs designed to assist survey researchers with analyzing their data include SPSS, MicroCase, and Excel.
- Data analysis is about identifying, describing, and explaining patterns.
- Contingency tables show how, or whether, one variable covaries with another.

EXWERCISES

1. Codebooks can range from relatively simple to quite complex. For an excellent example of a more complex codebook, check out the coding for the General Social Survey (GSS): http://publicdata.norc.org:41000/gss/documents//BOOK/GSS_Codebook.pdf.
2. The GSS allows researchers to cross-tabulate GSS variables directly from its website. Interested? Check out http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/Data+Analysis.

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3.2: Interviews- Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

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3.2.1: Chapter Introduction

Why Interview Research?

Today's young men are delaying their entry into adulthood. That's a nice way of saying they are "totally confused"; "cannot commit to their relationships, work, or lives"; and are "obsessed with never wanting to grow up."These quotes come from a summary of reviews on the website dedicated to Kimmel's book, *Guyland*: http://www.guyland.net. But don't take my word for it. Take sociologist Michael Kimmel's word. He interviewed 400 young men, ages 16 to 26, over the course of 4 years across the United States to learn how they made the transition from adolescence into adulthood. Since the results of Kimmel's research were published in 2008,Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. his book has made quite a splash. Featured in news reports, on blogs, and in many book reviews, some claim Kimmel's research "could save the humanity of many young men,"This quote from Gloria Steinem is provided on the website dedicated to Kimmel's book, *Guyland*: http://www.guyland.net. while others suggest that its conclusions can only be applied to "fraternity guys and jocks."This quote comes from "Thomas," who wrote a review of Kimmel's book on the following site: http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/2010/03/12/review-guyland. Whatever your take on Kimmel's research, one thing remains true: We surely would not know nearly as much as we now do about the lives of many young American men were it not for interview research.

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3.2.2: Interview Research- What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define interviews from the social scientific perspective.
2. Identify when it is appropriate to employ interviews as a data-collection strategy.

Knowing how to create and conduct a good interview is one of those skills you just can't go wrong having. Interviews are used by market researchers to learn how to sell their products, journalists use interviews to get information from a whole host of people from VIPs to random people on the street. Regis Philbin (a sociology major in collegeThis information comes from the following list of famous sociology majors provided by the American Sociological Association on their website: http://www.asanet.org/students/famous.cfm.) used interviews to help television viewers get to know guests on his show, employers use them to make decisions about job offers, and even Ruth Westheimer (the famous sex doctor who has an MA in sociologyRead more about Dr. Ruth, her background, and her credentials at her website: http://www.drruth.com.) used interviews to elicit details from call-in participants on her radio show.Interested in hearing Dr. Ruth's interview style? There are a number of audio clips from her radio show, *Sexually Speaking*, linked from the following site: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~chuck/ruthpg. Warning: some of the images and audio clips on this page may be offensive to some readers. It seems everyone who's anyone knows how to conduct an interview.

From the social scientific perspective, **interviews** are a method of data collection that involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers. The questions are designed by a researcher to elicit information from interview participant(s) on a specific topic or set of topics. Typically interviews involve an in-person meeting between two people, an interviewer and an interviewee. But as you'll discover in this chapter, interviews need not be limited to two people, nor must they occur in person.

The question of *when* to conduct an interview might be on your mind. Interviews are an excellent way to gather detailed information. They also have an advantage over surveys; with a survey, if a participant's response sparks some follow-up question in your mind, you generally don't have an opportunity to ask for more information. What you get is what you get. In an interview, however, because you are actually talking with your study participants in real time, you *can* ask that follow-up question. Thus interviews are a useful method to use when you want to know the story behind responses you might receive in a written survey.

Interviews are also useful when the topic you are studying is rather complex, when whatever you plan to ask requires lengthy explanation, or when your topic or answers to your questions may not be immediately clear to participants who may need some time or dialogue with others in order to work through their responses to your questions. Also, if your research topic is one about which people will likely have a lot to say or will want to provide some explanation or describe some process, interviews may be the best method for you. For example, I used interviews to gather data about how people reach the decision not to have children and how others in their lives have responded to that decision. To understand these "how's" I needed to have some back-and-forth dialogue with respondents. When they begin to tell me their story, inevitably new questions that hadn't occurred to me from prior interviews come up because each person's story is unique. Also, because the process of choosing not to have children is complex for many people, describing that process by responding to closed-ended questions on a survey wouldn't work particularly well.

In sum, interview research is especially useful when the following are true:

1. You wish to gather very detailed information
2. You anticipate wanting to ask respondents for more information about their responses
3. You plan to ask questions that require lengthy explanation
4. The topic you are studying is complex or may be confusing to respondents
5. Your topic involves studying processes

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Understanding how to design and conduct interview research is a useful skill to have.
- In a social scientific interview, two or more people exchange information through a series of questions and answers.
- Interview research is often used when detailed information is required and when a researcher wishes to examine processes.

EXERCISE

1. Think about a topic about which you might wish to collect data by conducting interviews. What makes this topic suitable for interview research?

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3.2.3: Qualitative Interview Techniques and Considerations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the primary aim of in-depth interviews.
2. Describe what makes qualitative interview techniques unique.
3. Define the term *interview guide* and describe how to construct an interview guide.
4. Outline the guidelines for constructing good qualitative interview questions.
5. Define the term *focus group* and identify one benefit of focus groups.
6. Identify and describe the various stages of qualitative interview data analysis.
7. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews are sometimes called intensive or **in-depth interviews**. These interviews are semistructured; the researcher has a particular topic about which he or she would like to hear from the respondent, but questions are open ended and may not be asked in exactly the same way or in exactly the same order to each and every respondent. In in-depth interviews, the primary aim is to hear from respondents about what *they* think is important about the topic at hand and to hear it in their own words. In this section, we'll take a look at how to conduct interviews that are specifically qualitative in nature, analyze qualitative interview data, and use some of the strengths and weaknesses of this method. In Section 3.2.5 "Issues to Consider for All Interview Types", we return to several considerations that are relevant to both qualitative and quantitative interviewing.

Conducting Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews might feel more like a conversation than an interview to respondents, but the researcher is in fact usually guiding the conversation with the goal in mind of gathering information from a respondent. A key difference between qualitative and quantitative interviewing is that qualitative interviews contain **open-ended questions**. The meaning of this term is of course implied by its name, but just so that we're sure to be on the same page, I'll tell you that open-ended questions are questions that a researcher poses but does *not* provide answer options for. Open-ended questions are more demanding of participants than closed-ended questions, for they require participants to come up with their own words, phrases, or sentences to respond.

In a qualitative interview, the researcher usually develops a guide in advance that he or she then refers to during the interview (or memorizes in advance of the interview). An **interview guide** is a list of topics or questions that the interviewer hopes to cover during the course of an interview. It is called a guide because it is simply that—it is used to guide the interviewer, but it is not set in stone. Think of an interview guide like your agenda for the day or your to-do list—both probably contain all the items you hope to check off or accomplish, though it probably won't be the end of the world if you don't accomplish everything on the list or if you don't accomplish it in the exact order that you have it written down. Perhaps new events will come up that cause you to rearrange your schedule just a bit, or perhaps you simply won't get to everything on the list.

Interview guides should outline issues that a researcher feels are likely to be important, but because participants are asked to provide answers in their own words, and to raise points that they believe are important, each interview is likely to flow a little differently. While the opening question in an in-depth interview may be the same across all interviews, from that point on what the participant says will shape how the interview proceeds. This, I believe, is what makes in-depth interviewing so exciting. It is also what makes in-depth interviewing rather challenging to conduct. It takes a skilled interviewer to be able to ask questions; actually *listen* to respondents; and pick up on cues about when to follow up, when to move on, and when to simply let the participant speak without guidance or interruption.

I've said that interview guides can list topics or questions. The specific format of an interview guide might depend on your style, experience, and comfort level as an interviewer or with your topic. I have conducted interviews using different kinds of guides. In my interviews of young people about their experiences with workplace sexual harassment, the guide I used was topic based. There were few specific questions contained in the guide. Instead, I had an outline of topics that I hoped to cover, listed in an order that I thought it might make sense to cover them, noted on a sheet of paper. That guide can be seen in Figure 3.2.3.1 "Interview Guide Displaying Topics Rather Than Questions".

Workplace Harassment Interview Guide

1 Work history—before and since high school

a. Jobs held
b. Gender (coworkers and managers)
c. Interactions/environment
d. Interactions outside of work

2. Problems in the workplace

a. Describe problems experienced
b. Any problems you define as sexual harassment
c. Define sexual harassment
d. Examples of behaviors that qualify
e. Describe harassment training

3. Feelings today

a. How do you feel about past experiences?
b. If happened again, how would you respond?

4. Sexual harassment in general

a. Why does it occur?
b. Why some are targeted and others are not?
c. Why some tell and others do not?

5. Other forms of harassment/discrimination

a. Housing, education, other work problems
b. Additional information about workplace interactions

Figure 3.2.3.1: *Interview Guide Displaying Topics Rather Than Questions*

In my interviews with child-free adults, the interview guide contained questions rather than brief topics. One reason I took this approach is that this was a topic with which I had less familiarity than workplace sexual harassment. I'd been studying harassment for some time before I began those interviews, and I had already analyzed much quantitative survey data on the topic. When I began the child-free interviews, I was embarking on a research topic that was entirely new for me. I was also studying a topic about which I have strong personal feelings, and I wanted to be sure that I phrased my questions in a way that didn't appear biased to respondents. To help ward off that possibility, I wrote down specific question wording in my interview guide. As I conducted more and more interviews, and read more and more of the literature on child-free adults, I became more confident about my ability to ask open-ended, nonbiased questions about the topic without the guide, but having some specific questions written down at the start of the data collection process certainly helped. The interview guide I used for the child-free project is displayed in Figure 3.2.3.2 "Interview Guide Displaying Questions Rather Than Topics".

Childfree Interview Guide

Your Decision: How did you decide to remain childfree?

- When/how did you first know?
- Why did you make the decision to remain childfree?
- Did you have any model couples or individuals who shaped your decision (people whose lives you either wanted to emulate or avoid)?
- Have you considered what your life would be like with children?
- What aspects of your life now do you think would be different?
- Do you have nieces, nephews, or others kids in your life with whom you have a relationship? Describe.
- How about pets? Describe.
- What do you most enjoy about your childfree lifestyle?
- What are some of the drawbacks of your childfree lifestyle?
- What role does your gender play in your decision?
- What role does your relationship status (married, partnered, single) play in your decision?
- What role does your sexual identity (heterosexual, G/L/B) play in your decision?

Response From Others: How have others responded to your decision?

- Did you discuss your decision with others before/while you made it?
- Do people ever assume that you will have children at some point? If yes, how do you respond?
- Have you lost any friends as a result of your decision?
- Have you made any friends as a result of your decision?
- Who, if anyone, pressures you to change your mind? How do you typically respond?
- Is there anyone in your life who has been especially supportive of your decision?
- Have you ever considered changing your mind as a result of others' reactions?
- What role does your gender play in people's responses?
- What role does your relationship status (married, partnered, single) play in people's responses?
- What role does your sexual identity (heterosexual, G/L/B) play in people's responses?
- How do you feel about others' reactions to your decision?

Reflections: How do you feel about your decision to remain childfree?

- How significant a role does the decision play in defining who you are?
- Do you have any guilt or regret about your decision? Explain.
- Do you have any concern about later guilt or regret? Explain.
- What does the word "family" mean to you?
- What would you like people to know about you and others who choose a childfree lifestyle?
- What else do you think I should know about your decision and others' responses?

Figure 3.2.3.2: *Interview Guide Displaying Questions Rather Than Topics*

As you might have guessed, interview guides do not appear out of thin air. They are the result of thoughtful and careful work on the part of a researcher. As you can see in both of the preceding guides, the topics and questions have been organized thematically and in the order in which they are likely to proceed (though keep in mind that the flow of a qualitative interview is in part determined by what a respondent has to say). Sometimes qualitative interviewers may create two versions of the interview guide: one version contains a very brief outline of the interview, perhaps with just topic headings, and another version contains detailed questions underneath each topic heading. In this case, the researcher might use the very detailed guide to prepare and practice in advance of actually conducting interviews and then just bring the brief outline to the interview. Bringing an outline, as opposed to a very long list of detailed questions, to an interview encourages the researcher to actually listen to what a participant is telling her. An overly detailed interview guide will be difficult to navigate through during an interview and could give respondents the misimpression that the interviewer is more interested in her questions than in the participant's answers.

When beginning to construct an interview guide, brainstorming is usually the first step. There are no rules at the brainstorming stage—simply list all the topics and questions that come to mind when you think about your research question. Once you've got a pretty good list, you can begin to pare it down by cutting questions and topics that seem redundant and group like questions and topics together. If you haven't done so yet, you may also want to come up with question and topic headings for your grouped categories. You should also consult the scholarly literature to find out what kinds of questions other interviewers have asked in studies of similar topics. As with quantitative survey research, it is best not to place very sensitive or potentially controversial questions at the very beginning of your qualitative interview guide. You need to give participants the opportunity to warm up to the interview and to feel comfortable talking with you. Finally, get some feedback on your interview guide. Ask your friends, family members, and your professors for some guidance and suggestions once you've come up with what you think is a pretty strong guide. Chances are they'll catch a few things you hadn't noticed.

In terms of the specific questions you include on your guide, there are a few guidelines worth noting. First, try to avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no, or if you do choose to include such questions, be sure to include follow-up questions.

Remember, one of the benefits of qualitative interviews is that you *can* ask participants for more information—be sure to do so. While it is a good idea to ask follow-up questions, try to avoid asking "why" as your follow-up question, as this particular question can come off as confrontational, even if that is not how you intend it. Often people won't know how to respond to "why," perhaps because they don't even know why themselves. Instead of "why," I recommend that you say something like, "Could you tell me a little more about that?" This allows participants to explain themselves further without feeling that they're being doubted or questioned in a hostile way.

Also, try to avoid phrasing your questions in a leading way. For example, rather than asking, "Don't you think that most people who don't want kids are selfish?" you could ask, "What comes to mind for you when you hear that someone doesn't want kids?" Or rather than asking, "What do you think about juvenile delinquents who drink and drive?" you could ask, "How do you feel about underage drinking?" or "What do you think about drinking and driving?" Finally, as noted earlier in this section, remember to keep most, if not all, of your questions open ended. The key to a successful qualitative interview is giving participants the opportunity to share information in their own words and in their own way.

Even after the interview guide is constructed, the interviewer is not yet ready to begin conducting interviews. The researcher next has to decide how to collect and maintain the information that is provided by participants. It is probably most common for qualitative interviewers to take audio recordings of the interviews they conduct.

Recording interviews allows the researcher to focus on her or his interaction with the interview participant rather than being distracted by trying to take notes. Of course, not all participants will feel comfortable being recorded and sometimes even the interviewer may feel that the subject is so sensitive that recording would be inappropriate. If this is the case, it is up to the researcher to balance excellent note-taking with exceptional question asking and even better listening. I don't think I can understate the difficulty of managing all these feats simultaneously. Whether you will be recording your interviews or not (and *especially* if not), practicing the interview in advance is crucial. Ideally, you'll find a friend or two willing to participate in a couple of trial runs with you. Even better, you'll find a friend or two who are similar in at least some ways to your sample. They can give you the best feedback on your questions and your interview demeanor.

All interviewers should be aware of, give some thought to, and plan for several additional factors, such as where to conduct an interview and how to make participants as comfortable as possible during an interview. Because these factors should be considered by both qualitative and quantitative interviewers, we will return to them in Section 3.2.5 "Issues to Consider for All Interview Types" after we've had a chance to look at some of the unique features of each approach to interviewing.

Although our focus here has been on interviews for which there is one interviewer and one respondent, this is certainly not the only way to conduct a qualitative interview. Sometimes there may be multiple respondents present, and occasionally more than one interviewer may be present as well. When multiple respondents participate in an interview at the same time, this is referred to as a **focus group**. Focus groups can be an excellent way to gather information because topics or questions that hadn't occurred to the researcher may be brought up by other participants in the group. Having respondents talk with and ask questions of one another can be an excellent way of learning about a topic; not only might respondents ask questions that hadn't occurred to the researcher, but the researcher can also learn from respondents' body language around and interactions with one another. Of course, there are some unique ethical concerns associated with collecting data in a group setting. We'll take a closer look at how focus groups work and describe some potential ethical concerns associated with them in Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis".

Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data

Analysis of qualitative interview data typically begins with a set of transcripts of the interviews conducted. Obtaining said transcripts requires having either taken exceptionally good notes during an interview or, preferably, recorded the interview and then transcribed it. Transcribing interviews is usually the first step toward analyzing qualitative interview data. To **transcribe** an interview means that you create, or someone whom you've hired creates, a complete, written copy of the recorded interview by playing the recording back and typing in each word that is spoken on the recording, noting who spoke which words. In general, it is best to aim for a verbatim transcription, one that reports word for word exactly what was said in the recorded interview. If possible, it is also best to include nonverbals in an interview's written transcription. Gestures made by respondents should be noted, as should the tone of voice and notes about when, where, and how spoken words may have been emphasized by respondents.

If you have the time (or if you lack the resources to hire others), I think it is best to transcribe your interviews yourself. I never cease to be amazed by the things I recall from an interview when I transcribe it myself. If the researcher who conducted the interview transcribes it himself or herself, that person will also be able to make a note of nonverbal behaviors and interactions that may be relevant to analysis but that could not be picked up by audio recording. I've seen interviewees roll their eyes, wipe tears

from their face, and even make obscene gestures that spoke volumes about their feelings but that could not have been recorded had I not remembered to include these details in their transcribed interviews.

The goal of **analysis** is to reach some inferences, lessons, or conclusions by condensing large amounts of data into relatively smaller, more manageable bits of understandable information. Analysis of qualitative interview data often works inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006).For an additional reminder about what an inductive approach to analysis means, see Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory". If you would like to learn more about inductive qualitative data analysis, I recommend two titles: Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. To move from the specific observations an interviewer collects to identifying patterns across those observations, qualitative interviewers will often begin by reading through transcripts of their interviews and trying to identify codes. A **code** is a shorthand representation of some more complex set of issues or ideas. In this usage, the word *code* is a noun. But it can also be a verb. The process of identifying codes in one's qualitative data is often referred to as *coding*. Coding involves identifying themes across interview data by reading and rereading (and rereading again) interview transcripts until the researcher has a clear idea about what sorts of themes come up across the interviews.

Qualitative researcher and textbook author Kristin Esterberg (2002)Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. describes coding as a multistage process. Esterberg suggests that there are two types of coding: open coding and focused coding. To analyze qualitative interview data, one can begin by **open coding** transcripts. This means that you read through each transcript, line by line, and make a note of whatever categories or themes seem to jump out to you. At this stage, it is important that you not let your original research question or expectations about what you *think* you might find cloud your ability to see categories or themes. It's called *open* coding for a reason—keep an open mind. Open coding will probably require multiple go-rounds. As you read through your transcripts, it is likely that you'll begin to see some commonalities across the categories or themes that you've jotted down. Once you do, you might begin focused coding.

Focused coding involves collapsing or narrowing themes and categories identified in open coding by reading through the notes you made while conducting open coding. Identify themes or categories that seem to be related, perhaps merging some. Then give each collapsed/merged theme or category a name (or code), and identify passages of data that fit each named category or theme. To identify passages of data that represent your emerging codes, you'll need to read through your transcripts yet again (and probably again). You might also write up brief definitions or descriptions of each code. Defining codes is a way of making meaning of your data and of developing a way to talk about your findings and what your data mean. Guess what? You are officially analyzing data!

As tedious and laborious as it might seem to read through hundreds of pages of transcripts multiple times, sometimes getting started with the coding process is actually the hardest part. If you find yourself struggling to identify themes at the open coding stage, ask yourself some questions about your data. The answers should give you a clue about what sorts of themes or categories you are reading. In their text on analyzing qualitative data, Lofland and Lofland (1995)Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. identify a set of questions that I find very useful when coding qualitative data. They suggest asking the following:

1. Of what topic, unit, or aspect is this an instance?
2. What question about a topic does this item of data suggest?
3. What sort of answer to a question about a topic does this item of data suggest (i.e., what proposition is suggested)?

Asking yourself these questions about the passages of data that you're reading can help you begin to identify and name potential themes and categories.

Still feeling uncertain about how this process works? Sometimes it helps to see how interview passages translate into codes. In Table 3.2.3.1 "Interview Coding Example", I present two codes that emerged from the inductive analysis of transcripts from my interviews with child-free adults. I also include a brief description of each code and a few (of many) interview excerpts from which each code was developed.

Table 3.2.3.1: Interview Coding Example

Code	Code description	Interview excerpts

Code	Code description	Interview excerpts
Reify gender	Participants *reinforce* heteronormative ideals in two ways: (a) by calling up stereotypical images of gender and family and (b) by citing their own "failure" to achieve those ideals.	"The woman is more involved with taking care of the child. [As a woman] I'd be the one waking up more often to feed the baby and more involved in the personal care of the child, much more involved. I would have more responsibilities than my partner. I know I would feel that burden more than if I were a man."
		"I don't have that maternal instinct."
		"I look at all my high school friends on Facebook, and I'm the only one who isn't married and doesn't have kids. I question myself, like if there's something wrong with me that I don't have that."
		"I feel badly that I'm not providing my parents with grandchildren."
Resist Gender	Participants *resist* gender norms in two ways: (a) by pushing back against negative social responses and (b) by redefining family for themselves in a way that challenges normative notions of family.	"Am I less of a woman because I don't have kids? I don't think so!"
		"I think if they're gonna put their thoughts on me, I'm putting it back on them. When they tell me, 'Oh, Janet, you won't have lived until you've had children. It's the most fulfilling thing a woman can do!' then I just name off the 10 fulfilling things I did in the past week that they didn't get to do because they have kids."
		"Family is the group of people that you want to be with. That's it."
		"The whole institution of marriage as a transfer of property from one family to another and the supposition that the whole purpose in life is to create babies is pretty ugly. My definition of family has nothing to do with that. It's about creating a better life for ourselves."

As you might imagine, wading through all these data is quite a process. Just as quantitative researchers rely on the assistance of special computer programs designed to help with sorting through and analyzing their data, so, too, do qualitative researchers. Where quantitative researchers have SPSS and MicroCase (and many others), qualitative researchers have programs such as NVivo (http://www.qsrinternational.com) and Atlasti (http://www.atlasti.com). These are programs specifically designed to assist qualitative researchers with organizing, managing, sorting, and analyzing large amounts of qualitative data. The programs work by allowing researchers to import interview transcripts contained in an electronic file and then label or code passages, cut and paste passages, search for various words or phrases, and organize complex interrelationships among passages and codes.

In sum, the following excerpt, from a paper analyzing the workplace sexual harassment interview data I have mentioned previously, summarizes how the process of analyzing qualitative interview data often works:

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed and imported into the computer program NVivo. NVivo is designed to assist researchers with organizing, managing, interpreting, and analyzing non-numerical, qualitative data. Once the transcripts, ranging from 20 to 60 pages each, were imported into NVivo, we first coded the data according to the themes outlined in our interview guide. We then closely reviewed each transcript again, looking for common themes across interviews and coding like categories of data together. These passages, referred to as codes or "meaning units" (Weiss, 2004),Weiss, R. S. (2004). In their own words: Making the most of qualitative interviews. *Contexts, 3*, 44–51. were then labeled and given a name intended to succinctly portray the themes present in the code. For this paper, we coded every quote that had something to do with the labeling of harassment. After reviewing passages within the "labeling" code, we placed quotes that seemed related together, creating several sub-codes. These sub-codes were named and are represented by the three subtitles within the findings section of this paper.Our three subcodes were the following: (a) "It's different because you're in high school": Sociability and socialization at work; (b) Looking back: "It was sexual harassment; I just didn't know it at the time"; and (c) Looking ahead: New images of self as worker and of workplace interactions. Once our sub-codes were labeled, we re-examined the interview transcripts, coding additional quotes that fit the theme of each sub-code. (Blackstone, Houle, & Uggen, 2006)Blackstone, A., Houle, J., & Uggen, C. "At the time, I thought it was great": Age, experience, and workers' perceptions of sexual harassment. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, QC, August 2006. Currently under review.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Interviews

As the preceding sections have suggested, qualitative interviews are an excellent way to gather detailed information. Whatever topic is of interest to the researcher employing this method can be explored in much more depth than with almost any other method. Not only are participants given the opportunity to elaborate in a way that is not possible with other methods such as survey research, but they also are able share information with researchers in their own words and from their own perspectives rather than being asked to fit those perspectives into the perhaps limited response options provided by the researcher. And because qualitative interviews are designed to elicit detailed information, they are especially useful when a researcher's aim is to study social processes, or the "how" of various phenomena. Yet another, and sometimes overlooked, benefit of qualitative interviews that occurs in person is that researchers can make observations beyond those that a respondent is orally reporting. A respondent's body language, and even her or his choice of time and location for the interview, might provide a researcher with useful data.

Of course, all these benefits do not come without some drawbacks. As with quantitative survey research, qualitative interviews rely on respondents' ability to accurately and honestly recall whatever details about their lives, circumstances, thoughts, opinions, or behaviors are being asked about. As Esterberg (2002) puts it, "If you want to know about what people actually do, rather than what they say they do, you should probably use observation [instead of interviews]."Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. Further, as you may have already guessed, qualitative interviewing is time intensive and can be quite expensive. Creating an interview guide, identifying a sample, and conducting interviews are just the beginning. Transcribing interviews is labor intensive—and that's before coding even begins. It is also not uncommon to offer respondents some monetary incentive or thank-you for participating. Keep in mind that you are asking for more of participants' time than if you'd simply mailed them a questionnaire containing closed-ended questions. Conducting qualitative interviews is not only labor intensive but also emotionally taxing. When I interviewed young workers about their sexual harassment experiences, I heard stories that were shocking, infuriating, and sad. Seeing and hearing the impact that harassment had had on respondents was difficult. Researchers embarking on a qualitative interview project should keep in mind their own abilities to hear stories that may be difficult to hear.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In-depth interviews are semistructured interviews where the researcher has topics and questions in mind to ask, but questions are open ended and flow according to how the participant responds to each.
- Interview guides can vary in format but should contain some outline of the topics you hope to cover during the course of an interview.
- NVivo and Atlas.ti are computer programs that qualitative researchers use to help them with organizing, sorting, and analyzing their data.
- Qualitative interviews allow respondents to share information in their own words and are useful for gathering detailed information and understanding social processes.
- Drawbacks of qualitative interviews include reliance on respondents' accuracy and their intensity in terms of time, expense, and possible emotional strain.

EXERCISES

1. Based on a research question you have identified through earlier exercises in this text, write a few open-ended questions you could ask were you to conduct in-depth interviews on the topic. Now critique your questions. Are any of them yes/no questions? Are any of them leading?
2. Read the open-ended questions you just created, and answer them as though you were an interview participant. Were your questions easy to answer or fairly difficult? How did you feel talking about the topics you asked yourself to discuss? How might respondents feel talking about them?

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3.2.4: Quantitative Interview Techniques and Considerations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define and describe standardized interviews.
2. Describe how quantitative interviews differ from qualitative interviews.
3. Describe the process and some of the drawbacks of telephone interviewing techniques.
4. Describe how the analysis of quantitative interview works.
5. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative interviews.

Quantitative interviews are similar to qualitative interviews in that they involve some researcher/respondent interaction. But the process of conducting and analyzing findings from quantitative interviews also differs in several ways from that of qualitative interviews. Each approach also comes with its own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. We'll explore those differences here.

Conducting Quantitative Interviews

Much of what we learned in the previous chapter on survey research applies to quantitative interviews as well. In fact, quantitative interviews are sometimes referred to as survey interviews because they resemble survey-style question-and-answer formats. They might also be called **standardized interviews**. The difference between surveys and standardized interviews is that questions and answer options are read to respondents rather than having respondents complete a questionnaire on their own. As with questionnaires, the questions posed in a standardized interview tend to be closed ended.See Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" for the definition of closed ended. There are instances in which a quantitative interviewer might pose a few open-ended questions as well. In these cases, the coding process works somewhat differently than coding in-depth interview data. We'll describe this process in the following subsection.

In quantitative interviews, an **interview schedule** is used to guide the researcher as he or she poses questions and answer options to respondents. An interview schedule is usually more rigid than an interview guide. It contains the list of questions and answer options that the researcher will read to respondents. Whereas qualitative researchers emphasize respondents' roles in helping to determine how an interview progresses, in a quantitative interview, consistency in the way that questions and answer options are presented is very important. The aim is to pose every question-and-answer option in the very same way to every respondent. This is done to minimize **interviewer effect**, or possible changes in the way an interviewee responds based on how or when questions and answer options are presented by the interviewer.

Quantitative interviews may be recorded, but because questions tend to be closed ended, taking notes during the interview is less disruptive than it can be during a qualitative interview. If a quantitative interview contains open-ended questions, however, recording the interview is advised. It may also be helpful to record quantitative interviews if a researcher wishes to assess possible interview effect. Noticeable differences in responses might be more attributable to interviewer effect than to any real respondent differences. Having a recording of the interview can help a researcher make such determinations.

Quantitative interviewers are usually more concerned with gathering data from a large, representative sample. As you might imagine, collecting data from many people via interviews can be quite laborious. Technological advances in telephone interviewing procedures can assist quantitative interviewers in this process. One concern about telephone interviewing is that fewer and fewer people list their telephone numbers these days, but random digit dialing (RDD) takes care of this problem. RDD programs dial randomly generated phone numbers for researchers conducting phone interviews. This means that unlisted numbers are as likely to be included in a sample as listed numbers (though, having used this software for quantitative interviewing myself, I will add that folks with unlisted numbers are not always very pleased to receive calls from unknown researchers). Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) programs have also been developed to assist quantitative survey researchers. These programs allow an interviewer to enter responses directly into a computer as they are provided, thus saving hours of time that would otherwise have to be spent entering data into an analysis program by hand.

Conducting quantitative interviews over the phone does not come without some drawbacks. Aside from the obvious problem that not everyone has a phone, research shows that phone interviews generate more fence-sitters than in-person interviews (Holbrook, Green, & Krosnick, 2003).Holbrook, A. L., Green, M. C., & Krosnick, J. A. (2003). Telephone versus face-to-face interviewing of national probability samples with long questionnaires: Comparisons of respondent satisficing and social desirability response bias. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 67*, 79–125. Responses to sensitive questions or those that respondents view as invasive are also generally less accurate when data are collected over the phone as compared to when they are collected in person. I can vouch for

this latter point from personal experience. While conducting quantitative telephone interviews when I worked at a research firm, it was not terribly uncommon for respondents to tell me that they were green or purple when I asked them to report their racial identity.

Analysis of Quantitative Interview Data

As with the analysis of survey data, analysis of quantitative interview data usually involves coding response options numerically, entering numeric responses into a data analysis computer program, and then running various statistical commands to identify patterns across responses. Section 3.1.6 "Analysis of Survey Data" of Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" describes the coding process for quantitative data. But what happens when quantitative interviews ask open-ended questions? In this case, responses are typically numerically coded, just as closed-ended questions are, but the process is a little more complex than simply giving a “no” a label of 0 and a “yes” a label of 1.

In some cases, quantitatively coding open-ended interview questions may work inductively, as described in Section 3.2.3 "Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data". If this is the case, rather than ending with codes, descriptions of codes, and interview excerpts, the researcher will assign a numerical value to codes and may not utilize verbatim excerpts from interviews in later reports of results. Keep in mind, as described in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", that with quantitative methods the aim is to be able to represent and condense data into numbers. The quantitative coding of open-ended interview questions is often a deductive process. The researcher may begin with an idea about likely responses to his or her open-ended questions and assign a numerical value to each likely response. Then the researcher will review participants’ open-ended responses and assign the numerical value that most closely matches the value of his or her expected response.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Quantitative Interviews

Quantitative interviews offer several benefits. The strengths and weakness of quantitative interviews tend to be couched in comparison to those of administering hard copy questionnaires. For example, response rates tend to be higher with interviews than with mailed questionnaires (Babbie, 2010).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. That makes sense—don’t you find it easier to say no to a piece of paper than to a person? Quantitative interviews can also help reduce respondent confusion. If a respondent is unsure about the meaning of a question or answer option on a questionnaire, he or she probably won’t have the opportunity to get clarification from the researcher. An interview, on the other hand, gives the researcher an opportunity to clarify or explain any items that may be confusing.

As with every method of data collection we’ve discussed, there are also drawbacks to conducting quantitative interviews. Perhaps the largest, and of most concern to quantitative researchers, is interviewer effect. While questions on hard copy questionnaires may create an impression based on the way they are presented, having a person administer questions introduces a slew of additional variables that might influence a respondent. As I’ve said, consistency is key with quantitative data collection—and human beings are not necessarily known for their consistency. Interviewing respondents is also much more time consuming and expensive than mailing questionnaires. Thus quantitative researchers may opt for written questionnaires over interviews on the grounds that they will be able to reach a large sample at a much lower cost than were they to interact personally with each and every respondent.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Unlike qualitative interviews, quantitative interviews usually contain closed-ended questions that are delivered in the same format and same order to every respondent.
- Quantitative interview data are analyzed by assigning a numerical value to participants’ responses.
- While quantitative interviews offer several advantages over self-administered questionnaires such as higher response rates and lower respondent confusion, they have the drawbacks of possible interviewer effect and greater time and expense.

EXERCISES

1. The General Social Survey (GSS), which we’ve mentioned in previous chapters, is administered via in-person interview, just like quantitative interviewing procedures described here. Read more about the GSS at http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website.
2. Take a few of the open-ended questions you created after reading Section 3.2.3 "Qualitative Interview Techniques and Considerations" on qualitative interviewing techniques. See if you can turn them into closed-ended questions.

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3.2.5: Issues to Consider for All Interview Types

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the main issues that both qualitative and quantitative interviewers should consider.
2. Describe the options that interviewers have for balancing power between themselves and interview participants.
3. Describe and define rapport.
4. Define the term *probe* and describe how probing differs in qualitative and quantitative interviewing.

While quantitative interviews resemble survey research in their question/answer formats, they share with qualitative interviews the characteristic that the researcher actually interacts with her or his subjects. The fact that the researcher interacts with his or her subjects creates a few complexities that deserve attention. We'll examine those here.

Power

First and foremost, interviewers must be aware of and attentive to the power differential between themselves and interview participants. The interviewer sets the agenda and leads the conversation. While qualitative interviewers aim to allow participants to have some control over which or to what extent various topics are discussed, at the end of the day it is the researcher who is in charge (at least that is how most respondents will perceive it to be). As the researcher, you are asking someone to reveal things about themselves they may not typically share with others. Also, you are generally not reciprocating by revealing much or anything about yourself. All these factors shape the power dynamics of an interview.

A number of excellent pieces have been written dealing with issues of power in research and data collection. Feminist researchers in particular paved the way in helping researchers think about and address issues of power in their work (Oakley, 1981).Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing feminist research* (pp. 30–61). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Suggestions for overcoming the power imbalance between researcher and respondent include having the researcher reveal some aspects of her own identity and story so that the interview is a more reciprocal experience rather than one-sided, allowing participants to view and edit interview transcripts before the researcher uses them for analysis, and giving participants an opportunity to read and comment on analysis before the researcher shares it with others through publication or presentation (Reinharz, 1992; Hesse-Biber, Nagy, & Leavy, 2007).Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. L. (Eds.). (2007). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. On the other hand, some researchers note that sharing too much with interview participants can give the false impression that there is no power differential, when in reality researchers retain the ability to analyze and present participants' stories in whatever way they see fit (Stacey, 1988).Stacey, J. (1988). Can there be a feminist ethnography? *Women's Studies International Forum*, *11*, 21–27.

However you feel about sharing details about your background with an interview participant, another way to balance the power differential between yourself and your interview participants is to make the intent of your research very clear to the subjects. Share with them your rationale for conducting the research and the research question(s) that frame your work. Be sure that you also share with subjects how the data you gather will be used and stored. Also, be sure that participants understand how their privacy will be protected including who will have access to the data you gather from them and what procedures, such as using pseudonyms, you will take to protect their identities. Many of these details will be covered by your institutional review board's informed consent procedures and requirements, but even if they are not, as researchers we should be attentive to how sharing information with participants can help balance the power differences between ourselves and those who participate in our research.

There are no easy answers when it comes to handling the power differential between the researcher and researched, and even social scientists do not agree on the best approach for doing so. It is nevertheless an issue to be attentive to when conducting any form of research, particularly those that involve interpersonal interactions and relationships with research participants.

Location, Location, Location

One way to balance the power between researcher and respondent is to conduct the interview in a location of the participants' choosing, where he or she will feel most comfortable answering your questions. Interviews can take place in any number of locations—in respondents' homes or offices, researchers' homes or offices, coffee shops, restaurants, public parks, or hotel lobbies, to name just a few possibilities. I have conducted interviews in all these locations, and each comes with its own set of benefits and its own challenges. While I would argue that allowing the respondent to choose the location that is most convenient and most

comfortable for her or him is of utmost importance, identifying a location where there will be few distractions is also important. For example, some coffee shops and restaurants are so loud that recording the interview can be a challenge. Other locations may present different sorts of distractions. For example, I have conducted several interviews with parents who, out of necessity, spent more time attending to their children during an interview than responding to my questions (of course, depending on the topic of your research, the opportunity to observe such interactions could be invaluable). As an interviewer, you may want to suggest a few possible locations, and note the goal of avoiding distractions, when you ask your respondents to choose a location.

Of course, the extent to which a respondent should be given complete control over choosing a location must also be balanced by accessibility of the location to you, the interviewer, and by your safety and comfort level with the location. I once agreed to conduct an interview in a respondent's home only to discover on arriving that the living room where we conducted the interview was decorated wall to wall with posters representing various white power organizations displaying a variety of violently racist messages. Though the topic of the interview had nothing to do with the topic of the respondent's home décor, the discomfort, anger, and fear I felt during the entire interview consumed me and certainly distracted from my ability to carry on the interview. In retrospect, I wish I had thought to come up with some excuse for needing to reschedule the interview and then arranged for it to happen in a more neutral location. While it is important to conduct interviews in a location that is comfortable for respondents, doing so should never come at the expense of your safety.

Researcher-Respondent Relationship

Finally, a unique feature of interviews is that they require some social interaction, which means that to at least some extent, a relationship is formed between interviewer and interviewee. While there may be some differences in how the researcher-respondent relationship works depending on whether your interviews are qualitative or quantitative, one essential relationship element is the same: R-E-S-P-E-C-T.You should know by now that I can't help myself. If you, too, now have Aretha Franklin on the brain, feel free to excuse yourself for a moment to enjoy a song and dance: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0XAI-PFQcA. A good rapport between you and the person you interview is crucial to successful interviewing. **Rapport** is the sense of connection you establish with a participant. Some argue that this term is too clinical, and perhaps it implies that a researcher tricks a participant into thinking they are closer than they really are (Esterberg, 2002).Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. While it is unfortunately true that some researchers might adopt this misguided approach to rapport, that is not the sense in which I use the term here nor is that the sort of rapport I advocate researchers attempt to establish with their subjects. Instead, as already mentioned, it is respect that is key.

There are no big secrets or tricks for how to show respect for research participants. At its core, the interview interaction should not differ from any other social interaction in which you show gratitude for a person's time and respect for a person's humanity. It is crucial that you, as the interviewer, conduct the interview in a way that is culturally sensitive. In some cases, this might mean educating yourself about your study population and even receiving some training to help you learn to effectively communicate with your research participants. Do not judge your research participants; you are there to listen to them, and they have been kind enough to give you their time and attention. Even if you disagree strongly with what a participant shares in an interview, your job as the researcher is to gather the information being shared with you, not to make personal judgments about it. In case you still feel uncertain about how to establish rapport and show your participants respect, I will leave you with a few additional bits of advice.

Developing good rapport requires good listening. In fact, listening during an interview is an active, not a passive, practice. **Active listening** means that you, the researcher, participate with the respondent by showing that you understand and follow whatever it is that he or she is telling you (Devault, 1990).For more on the practice of listening, especially in qualitative interviews, see Devault, M. (1990). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. *Social Problems, 37*, 96–116. The questions you ask respondents should indicate that you've actually heard what they've just said. Active listening probably means that you will probe the respondent for more information from time to time throughout the interview. A **probe** is a request for more information. Both qualitative and quantitative interviewers probe respondents, though the way they probe usually differs. In quantitative interviews, probing should be uniform. Often quantitative interviewers will predetermine what sorts of probes they will use. As an employee at the research firm I've mentioned before, our supervisors used to randomly listen in on quantitative telephone interviews we conducted. We were explicitly instructed not to use probes that might make us appear to agree or disagree with what respondents said. So "yes" or "I agree" or a questioning "hmmmm" were discouraged. Instead, we could respond with "thank you" to indicate that we'd heard a respondent. We could use "yes" or "no" if, and only if, a respondent had specifically asked us if we'd heard or understood what they had just said.

In some ways qualitative interviews better lend themselves to following up with respondents and asking them to explain, describe, or otherwise provide more information. This is because qualitative interviewing techniques are designed to go with the flow and

take whatever direction the respondent goes during the interview. Nevertheless, it is worth your time to come up with helpful probes in advance of an interview even in the case of a qualitative interview. You certainly do not want to find yourself stumped or speechless after a respondent has just said something about which you'd like to hear more. This is another reason that practicing your interview in advance with people who are similar to those in your sample is a good idea.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- While there are several key differences between qualitative and quantitative interviewing techniques, all interviewers using either technique should take into consideration the power differential between themselves and respondents, should take care in identifying a location for an interview, and should take into account the fact that an interview is, to at least some extent, a form of relationship.
- Feminist researchers paved the way for helping interviewers think about how to balance the power differential between themselves and interview participants.
- Interviewers must always be respectful of interview participants.

EXERCISES

1. Imagine that you will be conducting interviews. What are some possible locations in your area you think might be good places to conduct interviews? What makes those locations good?
2. What do you think about the suggestions for balancing power between interviewers and interviewees? How much of your own story do you think you'd be likely to share with interview participants? Why? What are the possible consequences (positive and negative) of revealing information about yourself when you're the researcher?

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3.3: Field Research- A Qualitative Technique

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3.3.1: Chapter Introduction

Why Field Research?

If we wanted to know who conducts more of the housework in households, how could we find the answer? One way might be to interview people and simply ask them. That is exactly what Arlie Hochschild did in her study of the *second shift*, her term for the work that goes on in the home after the day's work for pay is completed. Hochschild (1989)Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Viking. interviewed 50 heterosexual, married couples with children to learn about how they did, or did not, share the work of the second shift. Many of these couples reported to her that they shared the load of the second shift equally, sometimes dividing the house into areas that were "her responsibility" and those that were "his." But Hochschild wasn't satisfied with just people's personal accounts of second-shift work. She chose to observe 12 of these couples in their homes as well, to see for herself just how the second shift was shared.

What Hochschild discovered was that even those couples who claimed to share the second shift did not have as equitable a division of duties as they'd professed. For example, one couple who told Hochschild during their interview that they shared the household work equally had explained that the wife was responsible for the upstairs portion of the house and the husband took responsibility for the downstairs portion. Upon conducting observations in this couple's home, however, Hochschild discovered that the upstairs portion of the house contained all the bedrooms and bathrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, and the living room, while the downstairs included a storage space and the garage. This division of labor meant that the woman actually carried the weight of responsibility for the second shift. Without a field research component to her study, Hochschild might never have uncovered these and other truths about couples' behaviors and sharing (or not sharing) of household duties.

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3.3.2: Field Research- What Is It and When to Use It?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define field research.
2. Define participant observation and describe the continuum of participant observation.
3. Discuss at least two examples of field research.

There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that pretty accurately portrays life for a field researcher (Cotham, 2003).Cotham, F. (2003, September 1). Two barbarians and a professor of barbarian studies. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.cartoonbank.com/2003/two-barbarians-and-a-professor-of-barbarian-studies/invt/126562 It depicts "Two Barbarians and a Professor of Barbarian Studies." As field researchers, just as in the cartoon, we immerse ourselves in the settings that we study. While the extent to which we immerse ourselves varies (note in the cartoon the professor is riding a horse but has chosen to retain his professorial jacket and pipe), what all field researchers have in common is their participation in "the field."

Field research is a qualitative method of data collection aimed at understanding, observing, and interacting with people in their natural settings. Thus when social scientists talk about being in "the field," they're talking about being out in the real world and involved in the everyday lives of the people they are studying. Sometimes researchers use the terms *ethnography* or *participant observation* to refer to this method of data collection; the former is most commonly used in anthropology, while the latter is used commonly in sociology. In this text, we'll use two main terms: *field research* and *participant observation*. You might think of field research as an umbrella term that includes the myriad activities that field researchers engage in when they collect data: they participate, they observe, they usually interview some of the people they observe, and they typically analyze documents or artifacts created by the people they observe.

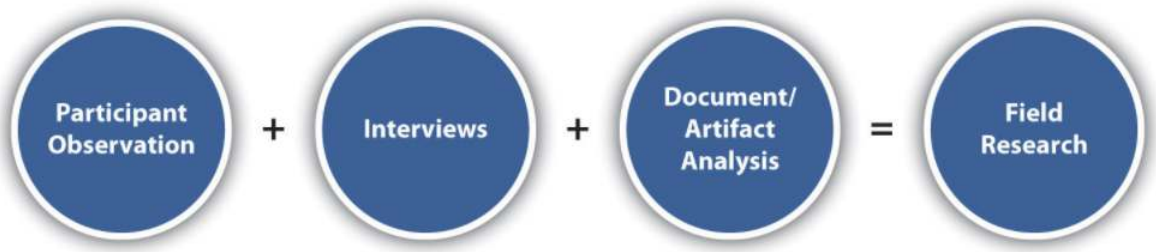

Figure 3.3.2.1: *Field research typically involves a combination of participant observation, interviewing, and document or artifact analysis. This chapter focuses primarily on participant observation.*

Because we cover interviews and document/artifact analysis in Chapter 3.1 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches" and Chapter 3.5 "Unobtrusive Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", here we'll focus only on the participation and observation aspects of field research. These aspects of field research are usually referenced together and are known as **participant observation**. Like field research, participant observation also has multiple meanings. Researchers conducting participant observation vary in the extent to which they participate or observe (Junker, 1960).Junker, B. H. (1960). *Field work: An introduction to the social sciences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. You might say that there's a continuum of participant observation, where complete observation lies at end of the continuum and complete participation lies at the other end.

In other chapters, we discuss two works that could fall on either end of the participant observation continuum. Barrie Thorne's (1993)Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. observations of children in classrooms, school cafeterias, hallways, and playgrounds rest near the complete observation end of the continuum. Rather than actually pretending to be an elementary school student and interacting with her research participants as they would each other, Thorne observed (which, as discussed in Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", was probably a wise move since it would have been difficult to convince the students that she was one of them). Laud Humphreys's (1970)Humphreys, L. (1970). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. London, UK: Duckworth. research on the tearoom trade, could be said to rest on the other end of the continuum. Rather than *only* observe, Humphreys played the key tearoom role of watch queen, a role

that nonresearcher participants in the trade also played. Humphreys also did not tell many of the people he observed that he was a researcher; thus from the perspectives of many of his "subjects," he was *only* a participant.

There are pros and cons associated with both aspects of the participant observer's role. Complete observers may miss important aspects of group interaction and don't have the opportunity to *fully* grasp what life is like for the people they observe. At the same time, sitting back and observing may grant them opportunities to see interactions that they would miss were they more involved. Complete participation has the benefit of allowing researchers a real taste of life in the group that they study. Some argue that participation is the only way to understand what it is that we investigate. On the other hand, complete participants may find themselves in situations that they'd rather not face but cannot excuse themselves from *because* they've adopted the role of complete participant. Also, complete participants who do not reveal themselves as researchers must face the ethical quandary of possibly deceiving their "subjects." In reality, most field research projects lie somewhere near the middle of the observer-participant continuum. Field researchers typically participate to at least some extent in their field sites, but there are also times when they may just observe. Where would *you* feel most comfortable as a field researcher—as an observer, a participant, or a bit of both?

As you might have imagined based on the examples of Thorne's and Humphreys's work, field research is well equipped to answer "how" kinds of questions. Whereas survey researchers often aim to answer "why" questions, field researchers ask *how* the processes they study occur, *how* the people they spend time with in the field interact, and *how* events unfold. Table 3.3.2.1 "Field Research Examples" presents just a few examples of the kinds of questions field researchers have asked in past projects along with a brief summary of where and what role those researchers took in the field. The examples presented in Table 3.3.2.1 "Field Research Examples" by no means represent an exhaustive list of the variations of questions field researchers have asked or of the range of field research projects that have been conducted over the years, but they do provide a snapshot of the kinds of work sociological field researchers engage in.

Table 3.3.2.1: Field Research Examples

Question	Researcher role	Author (year)
How is the social structure of a local "slum" organized?	Over 3 years of participation and observations among an Italian community in Boston's North End	Whyte (1942)William Foote Whyte is considered by many to be the pioneer of the use of participant observation methods in sociological studies. Whyte, W. F. (1942). *Street corner society: The social structure of an Italian slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
How do the urban poor live?	Twenty months of participation and observations among an African American community in Washington, DC	Liebow (1967)Liebow, E. (1967). *Tally's corner: A study of Negro streetcorner men*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
Why and how do workers consent to their own exploitation?	Ten months of participation as a machine operator in a Chicago factory along with observations of workers in the factory	Burawoy (1979)Burawoy, M. (1979). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
How is erotic labor organized in two different countries, and what are sex workers' experiences in each?	Brief participation in sex transactions in the Netherlands and California along with observations of and interviews with sex workers in both locations	Chapkis (1997)Chapkis, W. (1997). *Live sex acts: Women performing erotic labor*. New York, NY: Routledge.
How does childrearing differ across social classes?	Approximately one month each participating and observing in the homes and lives of 12 different families	Lareau (2003)Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Question	Researcher role	Author (year)
How is masculinity constructed by and among high school students, and what does this mean for our understandings of gender and sexuality?	Eighteen months of observations and interviews in a racially diverse working-class high school	Pascoe (2007)Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
How do sports play a role in shaping gender, class, family, and community?	Participation as a youth soccer volunteer along with observations and interviews	Messner (2009)Messner, M. (2009). *It's all for the kids: Gender, families, and youth sports*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Field research is a method that was originally crafted by anthropologists for the purpose of cultural understanding and interpretation (Wolcott, 2008).Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Altamira Press. Dissatisfied with studying groups of people based solely on secondhand accounts and inspection of artifacts, several anthropologists decided to try living in or near the communities they studied to learn from and about them. Two anthropologists in particular, Franz Boas (1888)Boas, F. (1888). *The central Eskimo*. Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology. and Bronislaw Malinowski (1922),Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London, UK: G. Routledge & Sons; New York, NY: E. P. Dutton. are credited with developing this method around the turn of the 20th century. Boas lived with native populations in Canada and in the American Northwest. Malinowski lived in Papua New Guinea with people who were native to the area. Sociologists picked up on the idea and on the benefits of field research (which we'll examine in Section 3.3.3 "Pros and Cons of Field Research"). Soon a number of sociologists had embraced this new method and adapted field research for their own studies of groups. Many of the early field researchers in sociology were former social workers who got interested in sociological research because of experiences in their roles as social reformers. The University of Chicago in particular played a key role in the development of American field research through, among other projects, its involvement in Hull House,Jane Addams Hull House Association. Retrieved from http://www.hullhouse.org a social settlement founded for European immigrants in Chicago (Deegan, 1986).Deegan, M. J. (1986). *Jane Addams and the men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Field research typically involves a combination of participant observation, interviewing, and document or artifact analysis.
- Different participant observation projects rest in different places on the continuum of complete observer to complete participant; most lie near the middle of the continuum.
- Field research has its origins in anthropology.

EXERCISES

1. As a preview to some of the pros, cons, joys, and frustrations of doing field research, watch the following clip, which shows "news" personality Stephen Colbert interviewing sociologist Sudhir VenkateshVenkatesh's work was introduced in Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory", the chapter on linking methods with theory. about his field research in some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods: http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/156631/march-13-2008/sudhir-venkatesh. The clip highlights some of the advantages field research has over survey interviewing; it also highlights some of the disadvantages of field research. Based on what you see in the clip, what are some of the main advantages of field research as compared to survey interviewing? What are some of the main disadvantages?
2. If you would like to learn more about William Foote Whyte's groundbreaking field research, a 40-minute interview with Whyte and several of his research participants, conducted nearly 40 years after the publication of *Street Corner Society*, can be found at the following link: http://www.northendwaterfront.com/home/2010/6/18/street-corner-society-video-of-william-foote-whyte-north-end.html. What role did Whyte play in the field: complete observer, complete participant, or something in between? Use evidence from the interview to support your answer. What pros and cons of field research come up in the interview?
3. Where do you think is the best place to reside on the observer-participant continuum? Why? What are the pros and cons of each of the various places on the continuum?

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3.3.3: Pros and Cons of Field Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and explain the strengths of field research.
2. Identify and explain the weaknesses of field research.

Field research has many benefits, as well as a set of drawbacks. We'll explore both here.

Strengths of Field Research

Field research allows researchers to gain firsthand experience and knowledge about the people, events, and processes that they study. No other method offers quite the same kind of closeup lens on everyday life. This close-up on everyday life means that field researchers can obtain very detailed data about people and processes, perhaps more detailed than they can obtain using any other method.

Field research is an excellent method for understanding the role of social context in shaping people's lives and experiences. It enables a greater understanding of the intricacies and complexities of daily life. Field research may also uncover elements of people's experiences or of group interactions of which we were not previously aware. This in particular is a unique strength of field research. With other methods, such as interviews and surveys, we certainly can't expect a respondent to answer a question to which they do not know the answer or to provide us with information of which they are not aware. And because field research typically occurs over an extended period of time, social facts that may not even be immediately revealed to a researcher but that become discovered over time can be uncovered during the course of a field research project.

In sum, the major benefits of field research are the following:

1. It yields very detailed data.
2. It emphasizes the role and relevance of social context.
3. It can uncover social facts that may not be immediately obvious or of which research participants may be unaware.

Weaknesses of Field Research

Earlier I described the fact that field researchers are able to collect very detailed data as a benefit of this method. This benefit, however, does come at a cost. Because a field researcher's focus is so detailed, it is by necessity also somewhat narrow. Field researchers simply are not able to gather data from as many individuals as, say, a survey researcher can reach. Indeed, field researchers generally sacrifice breadth in exchange for depth. Related to this point is the fact that field research is extremely time intensive.

Field research can also be emotionally taxing. In Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", I assert that interview research requires, to a certain extent, the development of a relationship between a researcher and her participants. But if interviews and field research both require relationship development, you might say that interviews are more like casual dating while field research is more like a full-blown, committed marriage.

The relationships you develop as a field researcher are sustained over a much longer period than the hour or two it might take you to conduct an interview. Not only do the relationships last longer, but they are also more intimate. A number of field researchers have documented the complexities of relationships with research participants (Arditti, Joest, Lambert-Shute, & Walker, 2010; Keinman & Copp, 1993; MacLeod, 1995).MacLeod, J. (1995). On the making of ain't no makin' it. In J. MacLeod (Ed.), *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood* (pp. 270–302). Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Arditti, J. A., Joest, K. A., Lambert-Shute, J., & Walker, L. (2010). The role of emotions in fieldwork: A self-study of family research in a corrections setting. *The Qualitative Report*, *15*, 1387–1414; Keinman, S., & Copp, M. A. (1993). *Emotions and fieldwork*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. On the plus side, these relationships can be very rewarding (and yield the rich, detailed data noted as a strength in the preceding discussion). But, as in any relationship, field researchers experience not just the highs but also the lows of daily life and interactions. And participating in day-to-day life with one's research subjects can result in some tricky ethical quandaries. It can also be a challenge if your aim is to observe as "objectively" as possible.

Finally, documentation can be challenging for field researchers. Where survey researchers have the questionnaires participants complete and interviewers have recordings, field researchers generally have only themselves to rely on for documenting what they observe. This challenge becomes immediately apparent upon entering the field. It may not be possible to take field notes as you

observe, nor will you necessarily know which details to document or which will become the most important details to have noted. And when you take notes after some observation, you may not recall everything exactly as you saw it when you were there.

In sum, the weaknesses of field research include the following:

1. It may lack breadth; gathering very detailed information means being unable to gather data from a very large number of people or groups.
2. It may be emotionally taxing.
3. Documenting observations may be more challenging than with other methods.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Strengths of field research include the fact that it yields very detailed data, it is designed to pay heed to social context, and it can uncover social facts that are not immediately obvious.
- Weaknesses of field research include that researchers may have to sacrifice breadth for depth, the possibility that the research will be emotionally taxing, and the fact that documenting observations can be challenging.

EXERCISES

- In your opinion, what is the most important strength of field research? What do you view as its greatest weakness? Explain your position.
- Find an article reporting results from field research. You can do this by using the Sociological Abstracts database, which was introduced in Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project". How do the authors describe the strengths and weaknesses of their study? Are any of the strengths or weaknesses described in this section mentioned in the article? Are there additional strengths or weaknesses not mentioned in this section?

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3.3.4: Getting In

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the two major considerations with respect to “getting in” field research sites.
2. Describe the factors one should consider when choosing a field research site.
3. Explain how one’s social location is relevant for choosing a field research site.
4. Describe the factors one should consider when deciding what role to play in a field research site.
5. Explain the difference between overt and covert roles in field research.

When embarking on a field research project, there are two major things to consider: where to observe and what role you’ll take in your field site. Your decision about each of these will be shaped by a number of factors, some of which you’ll have control over and others which you won’t. Your decision about where to observe and what role to play will also have consequences for the data you are able to gather and how you analyze and share those data with others. We’ll examine each of these contingencies in the following subsections.

Choosing a Site

Where you observe might be determined by your research question, but because field research often works inductively, you may not have a totally focused question before you begin your observations. In some cases, field researchers home in on a research question once they embark on data collection. Other times, they begin with a research question but remain open to the possibility that their focus may shift as they gather data. In either case, when you choose a site, there are a number of factors to consider. What do you hope to accomplish with your field research? What is your topical/substantive interest? Where are you likely to observe behavior that has something to do with that topic? How likely is it that you’ll actually have access to the locations that are of interest to you? How much time do you have to conduct your participant observations? Will your participant observations be limited to a single location, or will you observe in multiple locations?

Perhaps the best place to start as you work to identify a site or sites for your field research is to think about your *limitations*. One limitation that could shape where you conduct participant observation is time. Field researchers typically immerse themselves in their research sites for many months, sometimes even years. In my field research on activism in the breast cancer and antirape movements, I conducted over 300 hours of participant observation over a period of 3 years and conducted interviews with more than 60 activists (Blackstone, 2003).Blackstone, A. (2003). *Racing for the cure and taking back the night: Constructing gender, politics, and public participation in women’s activist/volunteer work* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. Other field researchers have spent as much or even more time in the field. Do you have several years available to conduct research, or are you seeking a smaller-scale field research experience? How much time do you have to participate and observe per day? Per week? Identifying how available you’ll be in terms of time will help you determine where and what sort of research sites to choose.

Also think about where you live and whether travel is an option for you. Some field researchers actually move to live with or near their population of interest. Is this something you might consider? Is it even an option? How you answer these questions will shape how you identify your research site. Professor Erik Larson’s (2010)Larson, E. (2010). Time and the constitution of markets: Internal dynamics and external relations of stock exchanges in Fiji, Ghana, and Iceland. *Economy and Society, 39*, 460–487. research on variations in economic institutions in a global environment, for example, has taken him across the globe, from Fiji to Ghana to Iceland. Sociologist Sara Dorow’s (2006)Dorow, S. (2006). *Transnational adoption: A cultural economy of race, gender, and kinship*. New York, NY: New York University Press. research on transnational adoption took her from the United States to China. And the work of Wendy Chapkis (1997),Chapkis, W. (1997). *Live sex acts: Women performing erotic labor*. New York, NY: Routledge. described in Table 3.3.2.1 "Field Research Examples", required her to conduct research not only in her original home state of California but also in the Netherlands. These are just a few of many examples of sociological researchers who have traveled the globe for the purpose of collecting data. Where might your field research questions take you?

In choosing a site, also consider how your social location might limit what or where you can study. The *ascribed* aspects of our locations are those that are involuntary, such as our age or race or mobility. How might my ascribed status as a middle-aged woman, for example, shape my ability to conduct complete participation in a study of children’s birthday parties? The *achieved* aspects of our locations, on the other hand, are those that we have some choice about. In field research, we may also have some choice about whether or the extent to which we reveal the achieved aspects of our identities. There are numerous

examples of field researchers whose achieved statuses granted them access to field sites into which they might not have otherwise been allowed. Jennifer Pierce (1995),Pierce, J. L. (1995). *Gender trials: Emotional lives in contemporary law firms*. Berkeley: University of California Press. for example, utilized her achieved status as a paralegal to gain entry into two law offices for her ethnographic study of the gendered division of labor in corporate law firms. In Lauraine Leblanc's (1999)Leblanc, L. (1999). *Pretty in punk: Girls' gender resistance in a boys' subculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. case, the achieved status of her appearance, including tattoos and a "punk" hairstyle and color, helped her gain the acceptance of research participants in her study of punk girls.

The preceding discussion should not be taken to mean that sociologists cannot, should not, or do not study those from whom we differ. In fact there have been plenty of successful field studies conducted by researchers who may have looked out of place in the sites they chose to investigate. Teresa Gowan, a self-described "small, white English woman" (2010, p. 16),Gowan, T. (2010). *Hobos, hustlers, and backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. conducted field research with homeless men in some of San Francisco's most notoriously rough neighborhoods. The aim here is not to reify the socially constructed categories upon which our society places so much emphasis in organizing itself. Rather, the point is to be aware of which ascribed and achieved aspects of your identity may shape your decisions about field sites.

Finally, in choosing a research site consider whether your research will be a collaborative project or whether you are on your own (Douglas, 1976).Douglas, J. D. (1976). *Investigative social research: Individual and team field research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. Collaborating with others has many benefits; you can cover more ground and therefore collect more data than you can on your own. And having collaborators in any research project, but especially field research, means having others with whom to share your trials and tribulations in the field. However, collaborative research comes with its own set of challenges such as possible personality conflicts among researchers, competing commitments in terms of time and contributions to the project, and differences in methodological or theoretical perspectives (Shaffir, Marshall, & Haas, 1979).Shaffir, W., Marshall, V., & Haas, J. (1979). Competing commitments: Unanticipated problems of field research. *Qualitative Sociology, 2*, 56–71. If you are considering collaborative field research, you are in good company; many fascinating examples precede you. David Snow and Leon Anderson (1993)Snow, D. A., & Anderson, L. (1993). *Down on their luck: A study of homeless street people*. Berkeley: University of California Press. conducted a collaborative study of homelessness in Austin, Texas. And researchers at the University of Minnesota recently conducted a large-scale, cross-country field study of how forms of difference such as race and religion shape American life and experience (http://www.soc.umn.edu/research/amp.html). When considering something that is of interest to you, consider also whether you have possible collaborators. How might having collaborators shape the decisions you make about where to conduct participant observation?

I began this discussion by asking you to think about limitations that might shape your field site decisions. But it makes sense to also think about the *opportunities*—social, geographic, and otherwise—that your location affords. Perhaps you are already a member of an organization where you'd like to conduct research. Maybe you know someone who knows someone else who might be able to help you access a site. Perhaps you have a friend you could stay with, enabling you to conduct participant observations away from home. Choosing a site for participation is shaped by all these factors—your research question and area of interest, a few limitations, some opportunities, and sometimes a bit of being in the right place at the right time.

Choosing a Role

As with choosing a research site, some limitations and opportunities beyond your control might shape the role you take once you begin your participant observation. You'll also need to make some deliberate decisions about how you enter the field and "who" you'll be once you're in.

In terms of entering the field, one of the earliest decisions you'll need to make is whether to be overt or covert. As an **overt** researcher, you enter the field with research participants having some awareness about the fact that they are the subjects of social scientific research. **Covert** researchers, on the other hand, enter the field as though they are full participants, opting not to reveal that they are also researchers or that the group they've joined is being studied. As you might imagine, there are pros and cons to both approaches. A critical point to keep in mind is that whatever decision you make about how you enter the field will affect many of your subsequent experiences in the field.

As an overt researcher, you may experience some trouble establishing rapport at first. Having an insider at the site who can vouch for you will certainly help, but the knowledge that subjects are being "watched" will inevitably (and understandably) make some people uncomfortable and possibly cause them to behave differently than they would were they not aware of being research subjects. Because field research is typically a sustained activity that occurs over several months or years, it is likely that

participants will become more comfortable with your presence over time. Overt researchers also avoid a variety of moral and ethical dilemmas that they might otherwise face. A *Far Side* cartoon demonstrates this point perfectly. It depicts a "researcher" dressed up like a gorilla, hanging out with a few other gorillas. In the cartoon, one of the real gorillas is holding out a few beetle grubs to the researcher, and the caption reads, "So you're a *real* gorilla, are you? Well I guess you wouldn't mind munchin' down a few beetle grubs, would you? In fact, we wanna see you chug 'em!" (http://www.e-noah.net/asa/asashoponlineservice/ProductDetails.aspx?productID=ASAOE710N04).

As a covert researcher, "getting in" your site might be easier, but then you might face other issues. For how long would you plan to conceal your identity? How might participants respond once they discover you've been studying them? And how will *you* respond if asked to engage in activities you find unsettling or unsafe? Field researcher Richard Mitchell (1991)Mitchell, R. G., Jr. (1991). Secrecy and disclosure in fieldwork. In W. B. Shaffir and R. A. Stebbins (Eds.), *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research* (pp. 97–108). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. was forced to consider these very questions during his covert research among right-wing survivalists when he was asked to participate in the swapping of violently racist and homophobic stories, an experience over which he later expressed profound grief and deep regret. Beyond your own personal level of comfort with deceiving participants and willingness to take risks, it is possible that the decision about whether to enter the field covertly will be made for you. If you are conducting research while associated with any federally funded agency (and even many private entities), your institutional review board (IRB) probably will have something to say about any planned deception of research subjects. Some IRBs approve deception, but others look warily upon a field researcher engaging in covert participation. The extent to which your research site is a public location, where people may not have an expectation of privacy, might also play a role in helping you decide whether covert research is a reasonable approach.

I mentioned that having an insider at your site who can vouch for you is helpful. Such insiders, with whom a researcher may have some prior connection or a closer relationship than with other site participants, are called **key informants**. A key informant can provide a framework for your observations, help "translate" what you observe, and give you important insight into a group's culture. If possible, having more than one key informant at a site is ideal, as one informant's perspective may vary from another's.

Once you've made a decision about how to enter your field site, you'll need to think about the role you'll adopt while there. Aside from being overt or covert, how close will you be to participants? In the words of Fred Davis (1973),Davis, F. (1973). The Martian and the convert: Ontological polarities in social research. *Urban Life*, *2*, 333–343. who coined these terms in reference to researchers' roles, will you be a *Martian*, a *Convert*, or a bit of both? Davis describes the Martian role as one in which a field researcher stands back a bit, not fully immersed in the lives of his subjects, in order to better problematize, categorize, and see with the eyes of a newcomer what's being observed. From the Martian perspective, a researcher should remain disentangled from too much engagement with participants. The Convert, on the other hand, intentionally dives right into life as a participant. From this perspective, it is through total immersion that understanding is gained. Which approach do you feel best suits you?

In the preceding section we examined how ascribed and achieved statuses might shape how or which sites you choose for your field research. They also shape the role you adopt in your field site. The fact that I am a professor, for example, is an achieved status, and I can choose the extent to which I share this aspect of my identity with field study participants. In some cases perhaps sharing that I am a professor would enhance my ability to establish rapport; in other field sites it might stifle conversation and rapport-building. As you've seen from the examples provided throughout this chapter, different field researchers have taken different approaches when it comes to using their social locations to help establish rapport and dealing with ascribed statuses that differ from those of their "subjects."

Whatever role you choose, many of the points made in Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches" about power and relationships with participants apply to field research as well. In fact, the researcher-researched relationship is even more complex in field studies, where interactions with participants last far longer than the hour or two it might take to interview someone. Moreover, the potential for exploitation on the part of the researcher is even greater in field studies as relationships are usually closer and lines between "research" and personal or off-the-record interaction may get blurred. These precautions should be seriously considered before deciding to embark upon a field research project.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When beginning a field research project, one must take care in planning where to conduct observations and what role to adopt in one's field site.
- The time you have available to spend in the field will be a major factor in choosing your research site.
- There are pros and cons to both the overt and the covert researcher roles.

- Ascribed and achieved statuses both shape the choices that field researchers make about their sites and about their roles within those sites.

EXERCISES

- Try to name at least three different locations where you might like to conduct field research. What barriers would you face were you to attempt to enter those sites as a researcher? In what ways might your entrée into the sites be facilitated by your social location?
- What is your opinion about researchers taking on a covert as compared with an overt role in field research? Which role would you like to take in a field research project? Why?

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3.3.5: Field Notes

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Define descriptive field notes.
- Cite the variety of ways that field researchers might take notes while in the field.
- Describe what should be noted when taking field notes.

Field notes are your opportunity to write poorly and get away with it. I say that in jest, but there is some truth to it. This is one type of writing where you should not be going for literary value, to make your writing interesting, and even to make it readable for anyone other than yourself. Instead, the aim is to record your observations as straightforwardly and, while in the field, as quickly as possible in a way that makes sense to *you*. **Field notes** are the first—and a necessary—step toward developing quality analysis. They are also the record that affirms what you observed. In other words, field notes are not to be taken lightly or overlooked as unimportant.

Some say that there are two different kinds of field notes: descriptive and analytic. Though the lines between what counts as "description" and what counts as "analysis" can get pretty fuzzy, the distinction is nevertheless useful when thinking about how to write and how to interpret field notes. In this section, we'll focus on descriptive field notes. **Descriptive field notes** are notes that simply describe a field researcher's observations as straightforwardly as possible. These notes typically do not contain explanations of or comments about those observations. Instead, the observations are presented on their own, as clearly as possible. In the following section, we'll examine the uses and writing of analytic field notes more closely.

Writing in the Field

Field researchers use a variety of strategies to take notes while in the field. Some research is conducted in settings where sitting with a notebook, iPad, or computer is no problem (e.g., if conducting observations in a classroom or at a meeting), but this is probably the exception rather than the norm. More often, field researchers must find creative ways to note their observations while engaged in the field. I've heard about field researchers jotting notes on their hands and arms, keeping very small notebooks in their pockets and occasionally jotting notes there, carrying small recorders to make quick observations, and even writing notes on toilet paper during visits to the restroom. With the advent of smartphones, taking notes in the field has become less arduous than it once was, as it is common to see someone texting or surfing the web from their phone in almost any setting.

Your strategy for recording your observations while in the field will be determined mostly by the site you choose and the role you play in that site. Will you be in a setting where having a notebook or smartphone in your hands will look out of place? If no, by all means, take notes! But don't let your note taking distract you from what's happening around you. Writing notes while in the field requires a fine balance between jotting down your observations and actually engaging in the setting. If you are strictly an observer, these will be easy to balance. But if you are also a participant, don't let your note taking keep you from participating. If you do happen to be in a location where taking notes "in the moment" would be too obvious, rude, or distracting, you may still be able to occasionally jot down a few things very quickly. You may also need to develop a way of jotting down observations that doesn't require complete sentences or perhaps even words. I know several field researchers who developed their own version of shorthand to take notes, using some combination of abbreviations and symbols, without taking too much time away from their participation in the field.

As with other proficiencies one develops, writing field notes is a skill that can be improved with practice. Recall the discussion in Chapter 1 "Introduction" about the dangers of informal observation. Conducting field research and taking field notes are decidedly *not* informal activities. In field research, observation is deliberate, not haphazard. That said, for a first-time field researcher, taking field notes can feel like a pretty haphazard activity. Understanding when to write, what to write, where to write, and how to write are all skills that field researchers develop with experience. I demonstrate this point to students early in our discussion of field methods by sending them out of the classroom in groups of two or three each and having them take notes about what they observe over a 15-minute period of time. No problem, they say. How hard can it be? Pretty tough, as it turns out. Students typically return from their 15 minutes of observation frustrated, confused, and annoyed with me for putting them through the experience.

So why torture my students in this way? It isn't just to be a jerk, I promise. When students return to the classroom, I ask them to compare notes with their group members and discuss what strategies they used in making and recording observations. Typically, students have some overlap in the kinds of things noted, but inevitably one person will have paid more attention to conversations

overheard, another to actions and unspoken physical expressions such how people walked or dressed, and yet another to nonhuman surroundings such as the landscape, sounds, and scents. Students conducting this exercise also often use different note-taking strategies, some drawing more pictures, others writing in complete sentences, others using abbreviations. I ask them to talk about what they've learned from the experience and the following two "lessons" are among the most frequently cited: (a) taking field notes is hard, and (b) it would have been nice to have some more direction before the exercise so they knew what to zero in on.

I'm always glad to hear that students recognize the difficulty of the task, and it's true that I give them very few instructions prior to the field note exercise. This is intentional. In part I hope to make the point that while field research projects often occur inductively, this doesn't mean that field researchers enter the field with absolutely no idea about what they plan to observe. Having a research question or topic in mind helps a researcher focus her or his observations. At the same time, it is important that field researchers not allow their original question or topic blind them to occurrences in the field that may not seem particularly important at the time. As I share with my students, you never know whether or how some observation might be important down the line. We'll take a closer look at this point in Section 3.3.6 "Analysis of Field Research Data".

No matter how difficult it can be to write notes while in the field, it is worth the effort. Field researchers rely on the notes they take in the field to develop more complete notes later and, eventually, to develop analysis. Have you heard the popular philosophical question about trees falling? It goes something like this: If a tree falls in the woods but nobody hears it, did it actually make a sound? I don't have a good answer for you from a philosophical perspective, but I can say that when it comes to field research, if you observe something but neglect to note it, it might as well not have happened. This is because you, like any other human being, cannot possibly be expected to remember everything that you see happen over the hours, days, months, or years that you spend collecting data in the field. For this reason, writing notes in the field (to the extent possible) is important, as is "filling in" those notes as soon as you are in a location where you can focus on more formal note taking. We examine this more formal aspect of note taking next.

Writing out of the Field

Immediately upon leaving any observation in the field, you should take the time to complete the brief notes you took while in the field. Even if you feel that the notes you've taken in the field are complete, you'll be surprised by how much more you'll recall once you sit down without distractions and read through what you've jotted down. You'll also have the opportunity to add your own reflections, or observations about your observations, when you write up more complete notes.

When you type up notes upon returning from an observation, you should "fill in the blanks" and write as much as possible about what you've just observed. Even if it seems mundane, I think it's fair to say that one's field notes can never contain too *much* detail. Writing as much as possible, in as much detail as possible, should also help you avoid generalizing in your field notes. Be specific about what you observe; rather than saying that "everyone" said or did something, make note of exactly *who* said or did X (or note that you're not sure exactly who did so but that it *seemed* as if most everyone did). Rather than saying that someone you observed was "angry," *describe* what gave you that impression. For example, was that person yelling, red in the face, or shaking her fist?

Don't forget to describe exactly where you were and detail your surroundings (in addition to describing the interactions and conversations you observed and participated in). Early in a field research project you may focus slightly more on describing the "lay of the land" than you do later on. This might mean writing up very detailed descriptions of the locations you observe and the people with whom you interact. You might also draw a map or, if appropriate in your setting, take pictures of your field sites. If your observations will be conducted in the same place and with the same people, these descriptive details you write up early on will become less noticeable to you over time. It will be helpful to have some documentation of your first impressions and of the sort of details that later become so much a part of the everyday scene that you stop noticing them. The following excerpt from my own field notes comes from my first meeting with two of the key informants in my field research in the breast cancer movement.

1/14/99, 11:00am

Met Jane and Polly at the XX office today. I was scheduled to be there at 10:30 but traffic was so bad due to last night's snow storm that I did not get there until 11:00am. Jane and Polly did not seem bothered by my tardiness (Polly, "We don't keep a time clock around here."). I walked into the building and took the elevator up to the second floor. I was a little unsure about where to go from there so I just walked into the first open door and said, "I'm looking for the XX office." A woman showed me into a large office (long and slightly irregular shape with windows on one wall, a desk and table and many chairs. Also two computers set up on a counter that runs along the wall across from the windows.) Two women were looking at a computer screen that was on the counter. When I walked in I introduced myself and Jane and Polly introduced themselves to me. Both women shook my hand, though Jane was the first to do so and did so with slightly more self-assurance than Polly. Polly told me to hang my coat on one of the "coat

racks" and gestured to the many chairs that were around the office. I placed my coat and purse in what I hoped would be the most out of the way location; a corner behind the table. (Blackstone, 2003)Blackstone, A. (2003). *Racing for the cure and taking back the night: Constructing gender, politics, and public participation in women's activist/volunteer work* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

The description in my field notes continues for several more paragraphs, but I won't torture you with those details. As you can see, this field notes excerpt is definitely not going to win the Pulitzer Prize for its riveting story or prose. Thankfully, that isn't its purpose. Instead, the goal was to describe a location where I knew I'd be spending a fair amount of time and to describe my first impressions of the two women I knew would be likely candidates for key informants. One thing you'll notice is that I used quotation marks every time I directly quoted a person. Including as many direct quotes as you can is a good idea, as such quotes provide support for the analytic points you'll make when you later describe patterns in your data. This is another reason that taking notes *in* the field (to the extent possible) is a good idea. Direct quotes may be difficult to remember hours or even minutes after hearing them. For this reason you may wish to write verbatim quotes while in the field and then take the time to describe the circumstances under which something was said later on when you write up your full notes after leaving the scene.

Another thing you might find were you to read through the many pages of field notes I took during my participant observation is that I use all capital letters and brackets in some places. This is the strategy I developed for expressing my own personal feelings and impressions in my field notes. While the distinction between what one *actually* observed and what one *thinks about* what he or she observed is not always easy to make, most field researchers do attempt to distinguish between these two categories of information.

The bracketed portions of your field notes may never be used, but in some cases they will become the very early stages in your analysis of data. My notes from three years of participant observation include bracketed notes of both types. Sometimes, I used bracketed notes to express emotion or purge difficult thoughts or feelings. This was especially helpful when I felt upset about or annoyed by something that had occurred in the field. Because field research requires developing personal relationships with "subjects," and because interpersonal relationships all experience various highs and lows, it is important to express your feelings about those relationships in your notes. Writing these more personal reflections may become important for analysis later or they may simply be cathartic at the moment. They might also reveal biases you have about the participants that you should confront and be honest about.

Every field researcher's approach to writing up field notes will vary according to whatever strategy works best for that individual. Where I used brackets to document personal feelings and reflections on bits of data, other field researchers may use the "comments" function in a word processing program or use a different font type, size, or color to distinguish observations from reflections. Others might create two columns for their full field notes—one containing notes only about what was observed directly and the other containing reactions and impressions. There isn't a wrong way to write field notes. What's important is that you adopt a strategy that enables you to write accurately, to write as much detail as possible, and to distinguish observations from reflections.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When taking descriptive field notes, researchers should try to make note of their observations as straightforwardly as possible.
- Field researchers might use any number of tools or strategies to facilitate taking notes in the field such as writing on one's own hands, dictating observations into a handheld recorder, or taking notes in the form of text messages on one's phone.
- In field research, observation is deliberate, not haphazard.
- Note taking does not end when a researcher exits an observation; handwritten notes are typed up immediately upon leaving the field so that researchers can "fill in the blanks" in their brief notes taken while in the field.

EXERCISES

1. Try out the note-taking exercise that my students complete in class. Find another person or two with whom you can conduct observations and take notes for about 15 minutes (perhaps someplace in your campus library, student union, or dorm). Sit near your peers who are also taking notes but do not talk with them during this portion of the exercise. Be sure to use all of your senses as you take notes: your eyes, your ears, your nose, your mouth, and your sense of touch. When your 15 minutes are up, compare notes with your peers. Where are there similarities? Where are their differences? Why do those similarities and differences exist? What strategy did you each employ to take notes? How might you approach field note taking differently were you asked to do it again?

3.3.5: Field Notes is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.3.6: Analysis of Field Research Data

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define analytic field notes and explain how they differ from descriptive field notes.
2. Explain why making note of mundane details is a good idea.
3. Describe the process by which field researchers analyze their data.
4. Define grounded theory.

Field notes are data. But moving from having pages of data to presenting findings from a field study in a way that will make sense to others requires that those data be analyzed. Analysis of field research data is the focus in this final section of the chapter.

From Description to Analysis

Writing and analyzing field notes involves moving from description to analysis. We considered field notes that are mostly descriptive in nature. Here we'll consider analytic field notes. **Analytic field notes** are notes that include the researcher's impressions about his observations. Analyzing field note data is a process that occurs over time, beginning at the moment a field researcher enters the field and continuing as interactions are happening in the field, as the researcher writes up descriptive notes, and as the researcher considers what those interactions and descriptive notes mean.

Often field notes will develop from a more descriptive state to an analytic state when the field researcher exits a given observation period, messy jotted notes or recordings in hand (or in some cases, literally *on* hand), and sits at a computer to type up those notes into a more readable format. We've already noted that carefully paying attention while *in* the field is important; so too is what goes on immediately upon exiting the field. Field researchers typically spend several hours typing up field notes after each observation has occurred. This is often where the analysis of field research data begins. Having time outside of the field to reflect upon your thoughts about what you've seen and the meaning of those observations is crucial to developing analysis in field research studies.

Once the analytic field notes have been written or typed up, the field researcher can begin to look for patterns across the notes by coding the data. This will involve the iterative process of open and focused coding that is outlined in Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches". As mentioned several times in Section 3.3.5 "Field Notes", it is important to note as much as you possibly can while in the field and as much as you can recall after leaving the field because you never know what might become important. Things that seem decidedly unimportant at the time may later reveal themselves to have some relevance.

In my field research experience, I was often surprised by the bits of data that turned out to hold some analytic relevance later on. For example, my field notes included a number of direct quotes and descriptions of informal interactions with participants that I didn't expect would be important but that I nevertheless jotted down. Several of these quotes eventually made their way into my analysis. For example, Polly, who ran the volunteer office for a breast cancer organization, once remarked to me, "We [in the volunteer office] don't use disposable cups here. It is always best to have coffee in a *real* mug. It's much nicer that way" (Blackstone, 2004, p. 187).Blackstone, A. (2004). Sociability, work, and gender. *Equal Opportunities International, 23,* 29–44.

It didn't occur to me at the time that this was just one of many tasks that Polly and other women volunteers do that remains largely invisible to the beneficiaries of their work. Because it is "much nicer" for volunteers to drink out of a real mug instead of a disposable cup, Polly actually spends a large amount of time washing mugs every day, and throughout the day, so that a clean, *real* mug is always available to the many volunteers who show up for brief volunteer shifts at the office each day. Had I not made a note of the coffee cup interaction with Polly, which at the time seemed rather mundane, I may have missed an important analytic point about the invisibility of some components of women's volunteer labor that I was later able to make in presentations and publications of the work.

Sometimes the analytic process of field researchers and others who conduct inductive analysis is referred to as **grounded theory** (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Grounded theory occurs, as you might imagine, from the "ground up." It requires that one begin with an open-ended and open-minded desire to understand a social situation or setting and involves a systematic process whereby the researcher lets the data guide her rather than guiding the data by preset hypotheses. The goal when employing a grounded theory approach is, perhaps not surprisingly, to generate theory. Its name not only implies that discoveries

are made from the ground up but also that theoretical developments are grounded in a researcher's empirical observations and a group's tangible experiences.

As exciting as it might sound to generate theory from the ground up, the experience can also be quite intimidating and anxiety-producing as the open nature of the process can sometimes feel a little out of control. Without hypotheses to guide their analysis, researchers engaged in grounded theory work may experience some feelings of frustration or angst. The good news is that the process of developing a coherent theory that is grounded in empirical observations can be quite rewarding—not only to researchers but also to their peers who can contribute to the further development of new theories through additional research and to research participants who may appreciate getting a bird's-eye view of their everyday experiences.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In analytic field notes, a researcher makes note of impressions about her or his observations.
- Details that may seem unimportant in the moment may turn out to be important during later analysis; it is therefore crucial that field researchers make note of these observations when conducting field research.
- In analyzing their data, many field researchers conduct grounded theory.
- Grounded theory involves generating theory from the ground up.

EXERCISE

1. Interested in learning more about grounded theory? Read all about it at the Grounded Theory Institute's website: http://www.groundedtheory.com/. What do you think about grounded theory? Is this way of conducting research something that is of interest to you? Why or why not?

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3.4: Unobtrusive Research- Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

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3.4.1: Chapter Introduction

Why Unobtrusive Research?

Are female and male athletes at the professional and college levels treated equally? You might think, 40 years since the passing of Title IX (the civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in education including athletics) and with the growing visibility of women athletes in sports such as golf, basketball, hockey, and tennis, that the answer would be an easy yes. But Professor Michael Messner's (2002)Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men, and sports*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. unobtrusive research shows otherwise, as does Professors Jo Ann M. Buysse and Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert's (2004)Buysse, J. A. M., & Embser-Herbert, M. S. (2004). Constructions of gender in sport: An analysis of intercollegiate media guide cover photographs. *Gender & Society, 18*, 66–81. content analysis of college athletics media guide photographs. In fact, Buysse and Embser-Herbert's unobtrusive research shows that traditional definitions of femininity are fiercely maintained through colleges' visual representations of women athletes as passive and overtly feminine (as opposed to strong and athletic). In addition, Messner and colleagues' (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993)Messner, M. A., Duncan, M. C., & Jensen, K. (1993). Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports. *Gender & Society, 7*, 121–137. content analysis of verbal commentary in televised coverage of men's and women's sports shows that announcers' comments vary depending on an athlete's gender identity. Such commentary not only infantilizes women athletes but also asserts an ambivalent stance toward their accomplishments.

Without unobtrusive research we might be inclined to think that more has changed for women athletes over the past 40 years than actually has changed.

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3.4.2: Unobtrusive Research- What Is It and When to Use It?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define unobtrusive research.
2. Define historical comparative research.

In this chapter, we explore unobtrusive methods of collecting data. **Unobtrusive research** refers to methods of collecting data that don't interfere with the subjects under study (because these methods are not *obtrusive*). Both qualitative and quantitative researchers use unobtrusive research methods. Unobtrusive methods share the unique quality that they do not require the researcher to interact with the people he or she is studying. It may seem strange that sociology, a discipline dedicated to understanding human social behavior, would employ a methodology that requires no interaction with human beings. But humans create plenty of evidence of their behaviors—they write letters to the editor of their local paper, they create various sources of entertainment for themselves such as movies and televisions shows, they consume goods, they walk on sidewalks, they lie on the grass in public parks. All these activities leave something behind—worn paths, trash, recorded shows, and printed papers. These are all potential sources of data for the unobtrusive researcher.

Sociologists interested in history are likely to use unobtrusive methods, which are also well suited to comparative research. **Historical comparative research** is "research that focuses either on one or more cases over time (the historical part) or on more than one nation or society at one point in time (the comparative part)" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 129).Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. While not all unobtrusive researchers necessarily conduct historical, comparative, or even some combination of historical and comparative work, unobtrusive methods are well suited to such work. As an example, Melissa Weiner (2010)Weiner, M. (2010). *Power, protest, and the public schools: Jewish and African American struggles in New York City*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press. used a historical comparative approach to study racial barriers historically experienced by Jews and African Americans in New York City public schools. Weiner analyzed public records from several years of newspapers, trial transcripts, and several organizations as well as private manuscript collections to understand how parents, children, and other activists responded to inequality and worked to reform schools. Not only did this work inform readers about the little-known similarities between Jewish and African American experiences, but it also informs current debates over inequalities experienced in public schools today.

In this chapter, we'll examine content analysis as well as analysis of data collected by others. Both types of analysis have in common their use of data that do not require direct interaction with human subjects, but the particular type and source of data for each type of analysis differs. We'll explore these similarities and differences in the following sections, after we look at some of the pros and cons of unobtrusive research methods.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Unobtrusive methods allow researchers to collect data without interfering with the subjects under study.
- Historical comparative methods, which are unobtrusive, focus on changes in multiple cases over time or on more than one nation or society at a single point in time.

EXERCISES

1. What are some additional sources of unobtrusive data, aside from those already mentioned, that sociologists might take interest in examining?
2. What locations might you like to compare in your own research? Are there changes that occur over time that you might be interested in exploring? Explain.

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3.4.3: Pros and Cons of Unobtrusive Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the major strengths of unobtrusive research.
2. Identify the major weaknesses of unobtrusive research.
3. Define researcher bias.
4. Define the Hawthorne effect.

As is true of the other research types examined in this text, unobtrusive research has a number of strengths and several weaknesses.

Strengths of Unobtrusive Research

Researchers who seek evidence of what people actually *do*, as opposed to what they say they do (as in survey and interview research), might wish to consider using unobtrusive methods. Field researchers may also claim this advantage over interview and survey research, but field researchers cannot be certain about what effect their presence in the field may have on the people and the interactions that they observe. While unobtrusive research projects, like all research projects, face the risk of introducing **researcher bias** into the work, researchers employing unobtrusive methods do not need to be concerned about the effect of the research *on their subjects*. This effect, known as the **Hawthorne effect**, is not a concern for unobtrusive researchers because they do not interact directly with their research participants. In fact, this is one of the major strengths of unobtrusive research.

Another benefit of unobtrusive research is that it *can* be relatively low-cost compared to some of the other methods we've discussed. Because "participants" are generally inanimate objects as opposed to human beings, researchers may be able to access data without having to worry about paying participants for their time (though certainly travel to or access to some documents and archives can be costly).

Unobtrusive research is also pretty forgiving. It is far easier to correct mistakes made in data collection when conducting unobtrusive research than when using any of the other methods described in this text. Imagine what you would do, for example, if you realized at the end of conducting 50 in-depth interviews that you'd accidentally omitted two critical questions from your interview guide. What are your options? Reinterview all 50 participants? Try to figure out what they might have said based on their other responses? Reframe your research question? Scratch the project entirely? Obviously none of these options is ideal. The same problems arise if a mistake is made in survey research. For field researchers, the consequences of "messing up" during data collection can be even more disastrous. Imagine discovering after tagging along on a political candidate's campaign that you needed a "do-over." In this case, that simply isn't an option. The campaign is over, and you'd need to find a new source of data. Fortunately for unobtrusive researchers, going back to the source of the data to gather more information or correct some problem in the original data collection is a relatively straightforward prospect.

Finally, as described in Section 3.4.2 "Unobtrusive Research: What Is It and When to Use It?", unobtrusive research is well suited to studies that focus on processes that occur over time. While longitudinal surveys and long-term field observations are also suitable ways of gathering such information, they cannot examine processes that occurred decades before data collection began, nor are they the most cost-effective ways to examine long-ranging processes. Unobtrusive methods, on the other hand, enable researchers to investigate events and processes that have long since passed. They also do not rely on retrospective accounts, which may be subject to errors in memory, as some longitudinal surveys do.

In sum, the strengths of unobtrusive research include the following:

1. There is no possibility for the Hawthorne effect.
2. The method is cost effective
3. It is easier in unobtrusive research than with other methods to correct mistakes.
4. Unobtrusive methods are conducive to examining processes that occur over time or in the past.

Weaknesses of Unobtrusive Research

While there are many benefits to unobtrusive research, this method also comes with a unique set of drawbacks. Because unobtrusive researchers analyze data that may have been created or gathered for purposes entirely different from the researcher's aim, problems of validity sometimes arise in such projects. It may also be the case that data sources measuring whatever a

researcher wishes to examine simply do not exist. This means that unobtrusive researchers may be forced to tweak their original research interests or questions to better suit the data that are available to them. Finally, it can be difficult in unobtrusive research projects to account for context. In a field research project, for example, the researcher is able to see what events lead up to some occurrence and observe how people respond to that occurrence. What this means for unobtrusive research is that while it can be difficult to ascertain *why* something occurred, we can gain a good understanding of *what* has occurred.

In sum, the weaknesses of unobtrusive research include the following:

1. There may be potential problems with validity.
2. The topics or questions that can be investigated are limited by data availability.
3. It can be difficult to see or account for social context.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Unobtrusive research is cost effective and allows for easier correction of mistakes than other methods of data collection do.
- The Hawthorne effect, which occurs when research subjects alter their behaviors because they know they are being studied, is not a risk in unobtrusive research as it is in other methods of data collection.
- Weaknesses of unobtrusive research include potential problems with validity, limitations in data availability, and difficulty in accounting for social context.

EXERCISES

1. Want to see the Hawthorne effect in action? Check out this totally nonscientific yet wholly entertaining application of the principle from Korea:

   (click to see video)

   What evidence of the Hawthorne effect do you see in the video?

2. What do you view as the most important strength and the most important weakness of unobtrusive research? Why?

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3.4.4: Unobtrusive Data Collected by You

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define content analysis.
2. Describe the kinds of texts that content analysts analyze.
3. Name at least two examples of content analysis research.
4. Define primary and secondary sources, describe their differences, and provide an example of each.
5. Define physical traces and compare them to material artifacts.
6. Outline the differences between manifest content and latent content.
7. Discuss the differences between qualitative and quantitative content analysis.
8. Describe code sheets and their purpose.

This section focuses on how to gather data unobtrusively and what to do with those data once they have been collected. There are two main ways of gathering data unobtrusively: conducting a content analysis of existing texts and analyzing physical traces of human behavior. We'll explore both approaches.

Content Analysis

One way of conducting unobtrusive research is to analyze texts. Texts come in all kinds of formats. At its core, content analysis addresses the questions of "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" (Babbie, 2010, pp. 328–329).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. **Content analysis** is a type of unobtrusive research that involves the study of human communications. Another way to think of content analysis is as a way of studying texts and their meaning. Here we use a more liberal definition of *text* than you might find in your dictionary. The text that content analysts investigate includes such things as actual written copy (e.g., newspapers or letters) and content that we might see or hear (e.g., speeches or other performances). Content analysts might also investigate more visual representations of human communication such as television shows, advertisements, or movies. The following table provides a few specific examples of the kinds of data that content analysts have examined in prior studies. Which of these sources of data might be of interest to you?

Table 3.4.4.1: Content Analysis Examples

Data	Research question	Author(s) (year)
Spam e-mails	What is the form, content, and quantity of unsolicited e-mails?	Berzins (2009)Berzins, M. (2009). Spams, scams, and shams: Content analysis of unsolicited email. *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge, and Society, 5*, 143–154.
James Bond films	How are female characters portrayed in James Bond films, and what broader lessons can be drawn from these portrayals?	Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro, Janstova, and Snyder-Suhy (2010)Neuendorf, K. A., Gore, T. D., Dalessandro, A., Janstova, P., & Snyder-Suhy, S. (2010). Shaken and stirred: A content analysis of women's portrayals in James Bond films. *Sex Roles, 62*, 747–761.
Console video games	How is male and female sexuality portrayed in the best-selling console video games?	Downs and Smith (2010)Downs, E., & Smith, S. L. (2010). Keeping abreast of hypersexuality: A video game character content analysis. *Sex Roles, 62*, 721–733.
Newspaper articles	How do newspapers cover closed-circuit television surveillance in Canada, and what are the implications of coverage for public opinion and policymaking?	Greenberg and Hier (2009)Greenberg, J., & Hier, S. (2009). CCTV surveillance and the poverty of media discourse: A content analysis of Canadian newspaper coverage. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 34*, 461–486.
Pro-eating disorder websites	What are the features of pro-eating disorder websites, and what are the messages to which users may be exposed?	Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, and Peebles (2010)Borzekowski, D. L. G., Schenk, S., Wilson, J. L., & Peebles, R. (2010). e-Ana and e-Mia: A content analysis of pro-eating disorder Web sites. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*, 1526–1534.

One thing you might notice about Table 3.4.4.1 "Content Analysis Examples" is that the data sources represent **primary sources**. That is, they are original. **Secondary sources**, on the other hand, are those that have already been analyzed. Shulamit Reinharz

offers a helpful way of distinguishing between these two types of sources in her methods text. She explains that while primary sources represent the "'raw' materials of history," secondary sources are the "'cooked' analyses of those materials" (1992, p. 155).Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is important for many aspects of social science, but it is *especially* important to understand when conducting content analysis. While there are certainly instances of content analysis in which secondary sources are analyzed, I think it is safe to say that it is more common for content analysts to analyze primary sources.

In those instances where secondary sources are analyzed, the researcher's focus is usually on the process by which the original analyst or presenter of data reached his conclusions or on the choices that were made in terms of how and in what ways to present the data. For example, Ferree and Hall (1990)Ferree, M. M., & Hall, E. J. (1990). Visual images of American society: Gender and race in introductory sociology textbooks. *Gender & Society*, *4*(4), 500–533. conducted a content analysis of introductory sociology textbooks, but their aim was not to learn about the content of sociology as a discipline. Instead, the researchers sought to learn how students are *taught* the subject of sociology and understand what images are presented to students as representative of sociology as a discipline.

Sometimes students new to research methods struggle to grasp the difference between a content analysis of secondary sources and a review of literature. In a review of literature, researchers analyze secondary materials to try to understand what we know, and what we don't know, about a particular topic. The sources used to conduct a scholarly review of the literature are typically peer-reviewed sources, written by trained scholars, published in some academic journal or press, and based on empirical research that has been conducted using accepted techniques of data collection for the discipline (scholarly theoretical pieces are included in literature reviews as well). These sources are culled in a review of literature in order to arrive at some conclusion about our overall knowledge about a topic. Findings are generally taken at face value.

Conversely, a content analysis of scholarly literature would raise questions not raised in a literature review. A content analyst might examine scholarly articles to learn something about the authors (e.g., Who publishes what, where?), publication outlets (e.g., How well do different journals represent the diversity of the discipline?), or topics (e.g., How has the popularity of topics shifted over time?). A content analysis of scholarly articles would be a "study of the studies" as opposed to a "review of studies." Perhaps, for example, a researcher wishes to know whether more men than women authors are published in the top-ranking journals in the discipline. The researcher could conduct a content analysis of different journals and count authors by gender (though this may be a tricky prospect if relying only on names to indicate gender). Or perhaps a researcher would like to learn whether or how various topics of investigation go in and out of style. She could investigate changes over time in topical coverage in various journals. In these latter two instances, the researcher is not aiming to summarize the content of the articles but instead is looking to learn something about how, why, or by whom particular articles came to be published.

Content analysis can be qualitative or quantitative, and often researchers will use both strategies to strengthen their investigations. In qualitative content analysis the aim is to identify themes in the text being analyzed and to identify the underlying meaning of those themes. A graduate student colleague of mine once conducted qualitative content analysis in her study of national identity in the United States. To understand how the boundaries of citizenship were constructed in the United States, Alyssa Goolsby (2007)Goolsby, A. (2007). *U.S. immigration policy in the regulatory era: Meaning and morality in state discourses of citizenship* (Unpublished master's thesis). Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. conducted a qualitative content analysis of key historical congressional debates focused on immigration law. Quantitative content analysis, on the other hand, involves assigning numerical values to raw data so that it can be analyzed using various statistical procedures. One of my research collaborators, Jason Houle, conducted a quantitative content analysis of song lyrics. Inspired by an article on the connections between fame, chronic self-consciousness (as measured by frequent use of first-person pronouns), and self-destructive behavior (Schaller, 1997),Schaller, M. (1997). The psychological consequences of fame: Three tests of the self-consciousness hypothesis. *Journal of Personality*, *65*, 291–309. Houle counted first-person pronouns in Elliott Smith song lyrics. Houle found that Smith's use of self-referential pronouns increased steadily from the time of his first album release in 1994 until his suicide in 2003 (2008).Houle, J. (2008). Elliott Smith's self referential pronouns by album/year. Prepared for teaching SOC 207, Research Methods, at Pennsylvania State University, Department of Sociology. We'll elaborate on how qualitative and quantitative researchers collect, code, and analyze unobtrusive data in the final portion of this section.

Indirect Measures

Texts are not the only sort of data that researchers can collect unobtrusively. Unobtrusive researchers might also be interested in analyzing the evidence that humans leave behind that tells us something about who they are or what they do. This kind evidence includes the **physical traces** left by humans and the **material artifacts** that tell us something about their beliefs, values, or norms.

Physical traces include such things as worn paths across campus, the materials in a landfill or in someone's trash can (a data source William Rathje and colleagues [Rathje, 1992; Rathje & Murthy, 1992]Rathje, W. (1992). How much alcohol do we drink? It's a question…so to speak. *Garbage, 4,* 18–19; Rathje, W., & Murthy, C. (1992). Garbage demographics. *American Demographics, 14,* 50–55. have used), indentations in furniture, or empty shelves in the grocery store. Examples of material artifacts include video games and video game equipment, sculptures, mementos left on gravestones, housing structures, or even kitchen utensils. What kinds of physical traces or material artifacts might be of interest to you?

I recently visited the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. While there I saw an exhibit displaying chef Julia Child's home kitchen, where she filmed many of her famous cooking shows. Seeing the kitchen made me wonder how cooking has changed over the past few decades since Child's shows were on air. I wondered how the layout of our kitchens and the utensils and appliances they contain might influence how we entertain guests, how much time we spend preparing meals, and how much time we spend cleaning up afterward. Our use of particular kitchen gadgets and utensils might even indicate something about our social class identities.Watch the following clip, featuring satirist Joe Queenan, from the PBS documentary *People Like Us* on social class in the United States: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_Rtl3Y4EuI. The clip aptly demonstrates the sociological relevance of kitchen gadgets. Answers to these questions have bearing on our norms and interactions as humans; thus they are just the sorts of questions sociologists using unobtrusive methods might be interested in answering. I snapped a few photos of the kitchen while at the museum. Though the glass surrounding the exhibit prevents ideal picture taking, I hope the photos in Figure 3.4.4.1 give you an idea of what I saw. Might the organizational scheme used in this kitchen, or the appliances that are either present or missing from it, shape the answers to the questions I pose above about human behaviors and interactions?

Figure 3.4.4.1: *A visit to Chef Julia Child's kitchen at the National Museum of American History inspired the author to think about how kitchens, kitchen utensils, and kitchen appliances have changed over time.*

One challenge with analyzing physical traces and material artifacts is that you generally don't have access to the people who left the traces or created the artifacts that you are analyzing. (And if you did find a way to contact them, then your research would no longer qualify as unobtrusive!) It can be especially tricky to analyze meanings of these materials if they come from some historical or cultural context other than your own. Situating the traces or artifacts you wish to analyze both in their original contexts and in your own is not always easy and can lead to problems related to validity and reliability. How do you know that you are viewing an object or physical trace in the way that it was intended to be viewed? Do you have the necessary understanding or knowledge about the background of its original creators or users to understand where they were coming from when they created it?

Imagine an alien trying to understand some aspect of Western human culture simply by examining our artifacts. Cartoonist Mark Parisi demonstrates the misunderstanding that could ensue in his drawing featuring three very small aliens standing atop a toilet. One alien says, "Since water is the life-blood on this planet, this must be a temple of some sort.…Let's stick around and see how they show their respect" (1989).Parisi, M. (1989). Alien cartoon 6. *Off the Mark.* Retrieved from http://www.offthemark.com/aliens/aliens06.htm Without a contextual understanding of Western human culture, the aliens have misidentified the purpose of the toilet, and they will be in for quite a surprise when someone shows up to use it!

The point is that while physical traces and material artifacts make excellent sources of data, analyzing their meaning takes more than simply trying to understand them from your own contextual position. You must also be aware of who caused the physical trace or created the artifact, when they created it, why they created, and for whom they created it. Answering these questions will require accessing materials in addition to the traces or artifacts themselves. It may require accessing historical documents or, if a contemporary trace or artifact, perhaps another method of data collection such as interviews with its creators.

Analysis of Unobtrusive Data Collected by You

Once you have identified the set of texts, physical traces, or artifacts that you would like to analyze, the next step is to figure out *how* you'll analyze them. This step requires that you determine your procedures for coding, understand the difference between

manifest and latent content, and understand how to identify patterns across your coded data. We'll begin by discussing procedures for coding.

You might recall being introduced to coding procedures in Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", where we discussed the coding of qualitative interview data. While the coding procedures used for written documents obtained unobtrusively may resemble those used to code interview data, many sources of unobtrusive data differ dramatically from written documents or transcripts. What if your data are sculptures or worn paths, or perhaps kitchen utensils, as in the previously discussed example? The idea of conducting open coding and focused coding on these sources as you would for a written document sounds a little silly, not to mention impossible. So how do we begin to identify patterns across the sculptures or worn paths or utensils we wish to analyze? One option is to take field notes as we observe our data and then code patterns in those notes. Let's say, for example, that we'd like to analyze kitchen utensils. Taking field notes might be a useful approach were we conducting observations of people actually using utensils in a documentary or on a television program. (Remember, if we're observing people *in person* then our method is no longer unobtrusive.)

If rather than observing people in documentaries or television shows our data include a collection of actual utensils, note taking may not be the most effective way to record our observations. Instead, we could create a **code sheet** to record details about the utensils in our sample. A code sheet, sometimes referred to as a tally sheet in quantitative coding, is the instrument an unobtrusive researcher uses to record observations.

In the example of kitchen utensils, perhaps we're interested in how utensils have changed over time. If we had access to sales records for utensils over the past 50 years, we could analyze the top-selling utensil for each year. To do so, we'd want to make some notes about each of the 50 utensils included in our sample. For each top-rated utensil, we might note its name, its purpose, and perhaps its price in current dollar amounts. We might also want to make some assessment about how easy or difficult it is to use or some other qualitative assessment about the utensil and its use or purpose. To rate the difficulty of use we could use a 5-point scale, with 1 being very easy to use and 5 being very difficult to use. We could even record other notes or observations about the utensils that may not occur to us until we actually see the utensils. Our code sheet might look something like the sample shown in Table 3.4.4.2 "Sample Code Sheet for Study of Kitchen Utensil Popularity Over Time". Note that the sample sheet contains columns only for 10 years' worth of utensils. If you were to conduct this project, obviously you'd need to create a code sheet that allows you to record observations for each of the 50 items in your sample.

Table 3.4.4.2: Sample Code Sheet for Study of Kitchen Utensil Popularity Over Time

	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
Utensil name										
Utensil purpose										
Price (in 2011 $)										
Ease of use (1–5 scale)										
Other notes										

As you can see, our code sheet will contain both qualitative and quantitative data. Our "ease of use" rating is a quantitative assessment; we can therefore conduct some statistical analysis of the patterns here, perhaps noting the mean value on ease of use for each decade we've observed. We could do the same thing with the data collected in the row labeled *Price*, which is also quantitative. The final row of our sample code sheet, containing notes about our impressions of the utensils we observe, will contain qualitative data. We may conduct open and focused coding on these notes to identify patterns across those notes. In both cases, whether the data being coded are quantitative or qualitative, the aim is to identify patterns across the coded data.

The *Purpose* row in our sample code sheet provides an opportunity for assessing both manifest and latent content. **Manifest content** is the content we observe that is most apparent; it is the surface content. This is in contrast to **latent content**, which is less obvious. Latent content refers to the underlying meaning of the surface content we observe. In the example of utensil purpose, we might say a utensil's manifest content is the stated purpose of the utensil. The latent content would be our assessment of what it means that a utensil with a particular purpose is top rated. Perhaps after coding the manifest content in this category we see some patterns that tell us something about the meanings of utensil purpose. Perhaps we conclude, based on the meanings of top-rated utensils across five decades, that the shift from an emphasis on utensils designed to facilitate entertaining in the 1960s to those

designed to maximize efficiency and minimize time spent in the kitchen in the 1980s reflects a shift in how (and how much) people spend time in their homes.

Kathleen Denny's (2011)Denny, K. (2011). Gender in context, content, and approach: Comparing gender messages in Girl Scout and Boy Scout handbooks. *Gender & Society, 25*, 27–47. recent study of scouting manuals offers another excellent example of the differences between manifest and latent content. Denny compared Boy Scout and Girl Scout handbooks to understand gender socializing among scouts. By counting activity types described in the manuals, Denny learned from this *manifest content* that boys are offered more individual-based and more scientific activities while girls are offered more group-based and more artistic activities. Denny also analyzed the *latent meaning* of the messages that scouting handbooks portray about gender; she found that girls were encouraged to become "up-to-date traditional women" while boys were urged to adopt "an assertive heteronormative masculinity" (p. 27).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Content analysts study human communications.
- The texts that content analysts analyze include actual written texts such as newspapers or journal entries as well as visual and auditory sources such as television shows, advertisements, or movies.
- Content analysts most typically analyze primary sources, though in some instances they may analyze secondary sources.
- Indirect measures that content analysts examine include physical traces and material artifacts.
- Manifest content is apparent; latent content is underlying.
- Content analysts use code sheets to collect data.

EXERCISES

1. Identify a research question you could answer using unobtrusive research. Now state a testable hypothesis having to do with your research question. Next identify at least two potential sources of data you might analyze to answer your research question and test your hypothesis.
2. Create a code sheet for each of the two potential sources of data that you identified in the preceding exercise.

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3.4.5: Analyzing Others' Data

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Name at least two sources of publicly available quantitative data.
2. Name at least two sources of publicly available qualitative data.

One advantage (or disadvantage, depending on which parts of the research process you most enjoy) of unobtrusive research is that you may be able to skip the data collection phase altogether. Whether you wish to analyze qualitative data or quantitative data sources, there are a number of free data sets available to social researchers. This section introduces you to several of those sources.

Many sources of quantitative data are publicly available. The General Social Survey (GSS), which was discussed in Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique", is one of the most commonly used sources of publicly available data among quantitative researchers (http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website). Data for the GSS have been collected regularly since 1972, thus offering social researchers the opportunity to investigate changes in Americans' attitudes and beliefs over time. Questions on the GSS cover an extremely broad range of topics, from family life to political and religious beliefs to work experiences.

Other sources of quantitative data include Add Health (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth), a study that was initiated in 1994 to learn about the lives and behaviors of adolescents in the United States, and the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch), a study that has, for over 40 years, surveyed 10,000 women and men who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. Quantitative researchers interested in studying social processes outside of the United States also have many options when it comes to publicly available data sets. Data from the British Household Panel Study (http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps), a longitudinal, representative survey of households in Britain, are freely available to those conducting academic research (private entities are charged for access to the data). The International Social Survey Programme (http://www.issp.org) merges the GSS with its counterparts in other countries around the globe. These represent just a few of the many sources of publicly available quantitative data.

Unfortunately for qualitative researchers, far fewer sources of free, publicly available qualitative data exist. This is slowly changing, however, as technical sophistication grows and it becomes easier to digitize and share qualitative data. Despite comparatively fewer sources than for quantitative data, there are still a number of data sources available to qualitative researchers whose interests or resources limit their ability to collect data on their own. The Murray Research Archive Harvard, housed at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University, offers case histories and qualitative interview data (http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/mra). The Global Feminisms project at the University of Michigan offers interview transcripts and videotaped oral histories focused on feminist activism; women's movements; and academic women's studies in China, India, Poland, and the United States.These data are not free, though they are available at a reasonable price. See the Global Feminism's order site for more on pricing: http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/dvd.html; http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/index.html. At the University of Connecticut, the Oral History Office provides links to a number of other oral history sites (http://www.oralhistory.uconn.edu/links.html). Not all the links offer publicly available data, but many do. Finally, the Southern Historical Collection at University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill offers digital versions of many primary documents online such as journals, letters, correspondence, and other papers that document the history and culture of the American South (http://dc.lib.unc.edu/ead/archivalhome.php?CISOROOT=/ead).

Keep in mind that the resources mentioned here represent just a snapshot of the many sources of publicly available data that can be easily accessed via the web. Table 3.4.5.1 "Sources of Publicly Available Data" summarizes the data sources discussed in this section.

Table 3.4.5.1: Sources of Publicly Available Data

Organizational home	Focus/topic	Data	Web address
National Opinion Research Center	General Social Survey; demographic, behavioral, attitudinal, and special interest questions; national sample	Quantitative	http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/

Organizational home	Focus/topic	Data	Web address
Carolina Population Center	Add Health; longitudinal social, economic, psychological, and physical well-being of cohort in grades 7–12 in 1994	Quantitative	http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth
Center for Demography of Health and Aging	Wisconsin Longitudinal Study; life course study of cohorts who graduated from high school in 1957	Quantitative	http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch/
Institute for Social & Economic Research	British Household Panel Survey; longitudinal study of British lives and well-being	Quantitative	http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps
International Social Survey Programme	International data similar to GSS	Quantitative	http://www.issp.org/
The Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University	Large archive of written data, audio, and video focused on many topics	Quantitative and qualitative	http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/mra
Institute for Research on Women and Gender	Global Feminisms Project; interview transcripts and oral histories on feminism and women's activism	Qualitative	http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/index.html
Oral History Office	Descriptions and links to numerous oral history archives	Qualitative	http://www.oralhistory.uconn.edu/links.html
UNC Wilson Library	Digitized manuscript collection from the Southern Historical Collection	Qualitative	http://dc.lib.unc.edu/ead/archivalhome.php?CISOROOT=/ead

While the public and free sharing of data has become increasingly common over the years, and it is an increasingly common requirement of those who fund research, Harvard researchers recently learned of the potential dangers of making one's data available to all (Parry, 2011).Parry, M. (2011, July 10). Harvard researchers accused of breaching students' privacy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/Harvards-Privacy-Meltdown/128166 In 2008, Professor Nicholas Christakis, Jason Kaufman, and colleagues, of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, rolled out the first wave of their data collected from the profiles of 1,700 Facebook users (2008).Berkman Center for Internet & Society. (2008, September 25). Tastes, ties, and time: Facebook data release. Retrieved from http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/node/4682 But shortly thereafter, the researchers were forced to deny public access to the data after it was discovered that subjects could easily be identified with some careful mining of the data set. Perhaps only time and additional experience will tell what the future holds for increased access to data collected by others.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Previously collected data sources enable researchers to conduct analysis without having to collect any of their own data.
- Some publicly available data sources are quantitative; others are qualitative.

EXERCISES

1. If you're interested in learning about additional sources of publicly available data, check out the American Sociological Association's lengthy and thorough list of public data resources: http://www2.asanet.org/student/pubdata00a.html. Which of those that you read about on the site are of most interest to you? Why?
2. Read *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article on Harvard's recent "privacy meltdown": http://chronicle.com/article/Harvards-Privacy-Meltdown/128166/. What do you think the future holds for the public sharing of data? How might the incident described in the *Chronicle* article shape how, when, and whether public sharing of social scientific data occurs?

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3.4.6: Reliability in Unobtrusive Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define *stability* and describe strategies for overcoming problems of stability.
2. Define *reproducibility* and describe strategies for overcoming problems of reproducibility.
3. Define *accuracy* and describe strategies for overcoming problems of accuracy.

This final section of the chapter investigates a few particularities related to reliability in unobtrusive research projects (Krippendorff, 2009)Krippendorff, K. (2009). Testing the reliability of content analysis data: What is involved and why. In K. Krippendorff & M. A. Bock (Eds.), *The content analysis reader* (pp. 350–357). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. that warrant our attention. These particularities have to do with how and by whom the coding of data occurs. Issues of stability, reproducibility, and accuracy all speak to the unique problems—and opportunities—with establishing reliability in unobtrusive research projects.

Stability refers to the extent to which the results of coding vary across different time periods. If stability is a problem, it will reveal itself when the same person codes the same content at different times and comes up with different results. Coding is said to be stable when the same content has been coded multiple times by the same person with the same result each time. If you discover problems of instability in your coding procedures, it is possible that your coding rules are ambiguous and need to clarified. Ambiguities in the text itself might also contribute to problems of stability. While you cannot alter your original textual data sources, simply being aware of possible ambiguities in the data as you code may help reduce the likelihood of problems with stability. It is also possible that problems with stability may result from a simple coding error, such as inadvertently jotting a *1* instead of a *10* on your code sheet.

Reproducibility, sometimes referred to as intercoder reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken, 2010),Lombard, M., Snyder-Duch, J., & Campanella Bracken, C. (2004). Practical resources for assessing and reporting intercoder reliability in content analysis research projects. Retrieved from http://astro.temple.edu/~lombard/reliability is the extent to which one's coding procedures will result in the same results when the same text is coded by different people. Cognitive differences among the individuals coding data may result in problems with reproducibility, as could ambiguous coding instructions. Random coding errors might also cause problems. One way of overcoming problems of reproducibility is to have coders code together. While working as a graduate research assistant, I participated in a content analysis project in which four individuals shared the responsibility for coding data. To reduce the potential for reproducibility problems with our coding, we conducted our coding at the same time in the same room, while sitting around a large, round table. We coded at the same time in the same room so that we could consult one another when we ran into problems or had questions about what we were coding. Resolving those ambiguities together meant that we grew to have a shared understanding of how to code various bits of data.

Finally, **accuracy** refers to the extent to which one's coding procedures correspond to some preexisting standard. This presumes that a standard coding strategy has already been established for whatever text you're analyzing. It may not be the case that official standards have been set, but perusing the prior literature for the collective wisdom on coding on your particular area is time well spent. Scholarship focused on similar data or coding procedures will no doubt help you to clarify and improve your own coding procedures.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Stability can become an issue in unobtrusive research project when the results of coding by the same person vary across different time periods.
- Reproducibility has to do with multiple coders' results being the same for the same text.
- Accuracy refers to the extent to which one's coding procedures correspond to some preexisting standard.

EXERCISES

1. With a peer, create a code sheet that you can use to record instances of violence on the television program of your choice. Now, on your own, watch two or three episodes of that program, coding for instances of violence as you go along. Your peer should do the same. Finally, compare your code sheet to that of your peer. How similar were you in your coding? Where do your coding results differ, and why? Which issues of reliability may be relevant?

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3.5: Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Why Additional Methods?

While the data collection methods described thus far in the text may be among the most commonly used in sociology, they certainly are not the only methods that social scientists use. Here we'll describe some of the other methods used in social science, including focus groups, experiments, and ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.

3.5: Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.5.1: Focus Groups

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define focus groups and outline how they differ from one-on-one interviews.
2. Discuss how different groups have used focus groups for different purposes.
3. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of focus group methodology.
4. Describe how to determine the best size for focus groups.
5. Identify the major considerations in focus group composition.
6. Discuss how to moderate focus groups.

Focus groups resemble qualitative interviews in that a researcher may prepare an interview guide in advance and interact with participants by asking them questions. But anyone who has conducted both one-on-one interviews and focus groups knows that each is unique. In an interview, usually one member (the research participant) is most active while the other (the researcher) plays the role of listener, conversation guider, and question asker. **Focus groups**, on the other hand, are planned discussions designed to elicit group interaction and "obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5).Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. In this case, the researcher may play a less active role than in a one-on-one interview. The researcher's aim is to get participants talking to each other and to observe interactions among participants.

Focus groups are typically more dynamic than interviews. The researcher takes the role of moderator, posing questions or topics for discussion, but then lets the group members discuss the question or topic among themselves. Participants may ask each other follow-up questions, agree or disagree with one another, display body language that tells us something about their feelings about the conversation, or even come up with questions not previously conceived of by the researcher. It is just these sorts of interactions and displays that are of interest to the researcher. A researcher conducting focus groups collects data on more than people's direct responses to her or his questions; the group interaction is a key focal point. Due to the nature and unpredictability of group interaction, and the fact that focus group researchers generally want to draw out group interaction, focus groups tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative.

There are numerous examples of sociological research using focus group methodology. In their 2008 study, for example, Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann (2010)Slater, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2010). "Uncool to do sport": A focus group study of adolescent girls' reasons for withdrawing from physical activity. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *11*, 619–626. conducted six focus groups with 49 adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 15 to learn more about girls' attitudes toward their own and other girls' participation in sports. In order to get focus group participants to speak with one another rather than with the group facilitator, the study's interview guide contained just two questions: "Can you tell me some of the reasons that girls stop playing sports or other physical activities?" and "Why do you think girls don't play as much sport/physical activity as boys?" In another focus group study, Virpi Ylanne and Angie Williams (2009)Ylanne, V., & Williams, A. (2009). Positioning age: Focus group discussions about older people in TV advertising. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *200*, 171–187. held nine focus group sessions with adults of different ages to gauge their perceptions of how older characters are represented in television commercials. Among other considerations, the researchers were interested in discovering how focus group participants position themselves and others in terms of age stereotypes and identities during the group discussion. In both examples, the researchers' core interest in group interaction could not have been assessed had interviews been conducted on a one-on-one basis; thus the focus group method was the ideal choice in each instance.

The preceding examples come from the work of academics who have used focus groups as their method of data collection. But focus groups have proven quite useful for those outside of academia as well. In fact, this method is especially popular among applied researchers. Market researchers use focus groups to gather information about the products or services they aim to sell. Government officials and political campaign workers use them to learn how members of the public feel about a particular issue or candidate. One of the earliest documented uses of focus groups comes from World War II when researchers used them to assess the effectiveness of troop training materials and of various propaganda efforts (Merton & Kendall, 1946; Morgan, 1997).Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Market researchers quickly adopted this method of collecting data to learn about human beliefs and behaviors. Within social science, the use of focus groups did not really take off until the 1980s, when demographers and communication researchers began to appreciate their use in understanding knowledge,

attitudes, and communication (Morgan, 1997).Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Focus groups share many of the strengths and weaknesses of one-on-one qualitative interviews. Both methods can yield very detailed, in-depth information; are excellent for studying social processes; and provide researchers with an opportunity not only to hear what participants say but also to observe what they do in terms of their body language. Focus groups offer the added benefit of giving researchers a chance to collect data on human interaction by observing how group participants respond and react to one another. Like one-on-one qualitative interviews, focus groups can also be quite expensive and time-consuming. However, there may be some time savings with focus groups as it takes fewer group events than one-on-one interviews to gather data from the same number of people. Another potential drawback of focus groups, which is not a concern for one-on-one interviews, is that one or two participants might dominate the group, silencing other participants. Careful planning and skillful moderation on the part of the researcher are crucial for avoiding, or at least dealing with, such possibilities. The various strengths and weaknesses of focus group research are summarized in Table 3.5.1.1 "Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Group Research".

Table 3.5.1.1: Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Group Research

Strengths	Weaknesses
Yield detailed, in-depth data	Expensive
Less time-consuming than one-on-one interviews	May be more time-consuming than survey research
Useful for studying social processes	Minority of participants may dominate entire group
Allow researchers to observe body language in addition to self-reports	
Allow researchers to observe interaction between multiple participants	

As mentioned, careful planning and skillful moderating are two crucial considerations in the effective use of focus groups as a method of data collection. In some ways, focus groups require more advance planning than other qualitative methods of data collection such as one-on-one interviews, where a researcher may be better able to control the setting and the dialogue, or field research, where “going with the flow” and observing events as they happen in their natural setting is the primary aim and time is less limited. Researchers must take care to form focus groups whose members will want to interact with one another and to control the timing of the event so that participants are not asked nor expected to stay for a longer time than they’ve agreed to participate. The researcher should also be prepared to inform focus group participants of their responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of what is said in the group. But while the researcher can and should encourage all focus group members to maintain confidentiality, she should also clarify to participants that the unique nature of the group setting prevents her from being able to promise that confidentiality will be maintained.

Group size should be determined in part by the topic of the interview and your sense of the likelihood that participants will have much to say without much prompting. If the topic is one about which you think participants feel passionately and will have much to say, I think a group of 3–5 is ideal. Groups larger than that, especially for heated topics, can easily become unmanageable. Some recommend that a group of about 6–10 participants is the ideal size for focus group research (Morgan, 1997);Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. others recommend that groups should include 3–12 participants (Adler & Clark, 2008).Adler, E. S., & Clark, R. (2008). *How it’s done: An invitation to social research* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth. The size of the focus group is ultimately your decision as the researcher. When forming groups and deciding how large or small to make them, take into consideration what you know about the topic and participants’ potential interest in, passion for, and feelings about the topic. Also consider your comfort level and experience in conducting focus groups. These factors will help you decide which size is right in your particular case.

It may seem counterintuitive, but in general, it is better to form focus groups consisting of participants who do not know one another than to create groups consisting of friends, relatives, or acquaintances (Agar & MacDonald, 1995).Agar, M., & MacDonald, J. (1995). Focus groups and ethnography. *Human Organization*, *54*, 78–86. The reason for this is that groups who know each other may share some take-for-granted knowledge or assumptions. In sociological research, it is precisely the taken-for-granted that is often of interest; thus the focus group researcher should avoid setting up interactions where participants may be discouraged to question or raise issues that they take for granted. However, groups should not be so heterogeneous that participants will be unlikely to feel comfortable talking with one another.

Focus group researchers must carefully consider the composition of the groups they put together. In his text on conducting focus groups, Morgan suggests that "homogeneity in background and not homogeneity in attitudes" (p. 36) should be the goal, since participants must feel comfortable speaking up but must also have enough differences to facilitate a productive discussion (1997).Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Whatever composition a researcher designs for her or his focus groups, the important point to keep in mind is that focus group dynamics are shaped by multiple social contexts (Hollander, 2004).Hollander, J. A. (2004). The social context of focus groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *33*, 602–637. Participants' silences as well as their speech may be shaped by gender, race, class, sexuality, age, or other background characteristics or social dynamics, all of which might be suppressed or exacerbated depending on the composition of the group. Hollander suggests that researchers must pay careful attention to group composition, must be attentive to group dynamics during the focus group discussion, and should triangulate multiple methods of data collection in order to "untangle participants' responses and their relationship to the social contexts of the focus group" (p. 632).

In addition to the importance of advance planning, focus groups also require skillful moderation. While a researcher certainly doesn't want to be viewed as a stick-in-the-mud or as overly domineering, it is important to set ground rules for focus groups at the outset of the discussion. Remind participants that you've invited them to participate because you want to hear from *all* of them. Therefore the group should aim to let just one person speak at a time and avoid letting just a couple of participants dominate the conversation. One way to do this is to begin the discussion by asking participants to briefly introduce themselves or to provide a brief response to an opening question. This will help set the tone of having all group members participate. Also ask participants to avoid having side conversations; sharing thoughts about or reactions to what is said in the group is important and should not be limited to only a few group members.

As the focus group gets rolling, the moderator will play a less active role than he does in a one-on-one interview. There may be times when the conversation stagnates or when you, as moderator, wish to guide the conversation in another direction. In these instances, it is important to demonstrate that you've been paying attention to what participants have said. Being prepared to interject statements or questions such as "I'd really like to hear more about what Sally and Joe think about what Dominick and Ashley have been saying" or "Several of you have mentioned ____. What do others think about this?" will be important for keeping the conversation going. It can also help redirect the conversation, shift the focus to participants who have been less active in the group, and serve as a cue to those who may be dominating the conversation that it is time to allow others to speak.

In sum, focus groups are a useful method for researchers who wish to gather in-depth information about social processes. Focus groups are similar to one-on-one qualitative interviews in many ways, but they give researchers the opportunity to observe group dynamics that cannot be observed in one-on-one interviews. Historically, focus group research was more commonly used by applied researchers than by academics, though in recent decades social scientists from all domains have discovered the usefulness of focus groups for gaining understanding of social processes and have begun using this method of data collection in their studies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Focus groups are designed to elicit group interaction.
- Focus groups are used in a variety of professions, from market research to academia to government and political research.
- Like one-on-one qualitative interviews, focus groups can yield very detailed information, are excellent for studying social processes, and provide researchers with an opportunity to observe participants' body language; they also allow researchers to observe human interaction.
- Focus groups can be expensive and time-consuming, as are one-on-one interviews; there is also the possibility that a few participants will dominate the group and silence others in the group.
- In terms of focus group composition, homogeneity of background among participants is recommended while diverse attitudes within the group are ideal.

EXERCISES

1. Musician John Mayer held a "focus group" to get fan feedback on his career. Watch and critique his focus group facilitation style in this clip:

   (click to see video)

   How well does Mayer play the role of a "behind-the-scenes" focus group moderator? How well does he get focus group participants to talk with each other? Knowing what you now know about interviews and focus group research, what advice would you give Mayer for improving his focus group facilitation skills?

2. To see what a *real* marketing focus group looks like, watch the following video:

   (click to see video)

   You'll see several of the tips mentioned in this section applied. As you watch, what elements of the major strengths and weaknesses of focus group research seem to be in play?

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3.5.2: Experiments

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define *experiment*.
2. Distinguish “true” experiments from preexperimental designs.
3. Identify the core features of true experimental designs.
4. Describe the difference between an experimental group and a control group.
5. Identify and describe the various types of true experimental designs.
6. Identify and describe the various types of preexperimental designs.
7. Name the key strengths and weaknesses of experiments.
8. Define *internal validity* and *external validity*.

Experiments are an excellent data collection strategy for those wishing to observe the consequences of very specific actions or stimuli. Most commonly a quantitative research method, experiments are used more often by psychologists than sociologists, but understanding what experiments are and how they are conducted is useful for all social scientists, whether they actually plan to use this methodology or simply aim to understand findings based on experimental designs. An **experiment** is a method of data collection designed to test hypotheses under controlled conditions. Students in my research methods classes often use the term *experiment* to describe all kinds of empirical research projects, but in social scientific research, the term has a unique meaning and should not be used to describe *all* research methodologies.

Several kinds of experimental designs exist. In general, designs considered to be “true experiments” contain three key features: independent and dependent variables, pretesting and posttesting, and experimental and control groups. In the **classic experiment**, the effect of a stimulus is tested by comparing two groups: one that is exposed to the stimulus (the **experimental group**) and another that does not receive the stimulus (the **control group**). In other words, the effects of an independent variable upon a dependent variable are tested. Because the researcher’s interest lies in the effects of an independent variable, she must measure participants on the dependent variable before and after the independent variable (or stimulus) is administered. Thus pretesting and posttesting are both important steps in a classic experiment.

One example of experimental research can be found in Shannon K. McCoy and Brenda Major’s (2003)McCoy, S. K., & Major, B. (2003). Group identification moderates emotional response to perceived prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*, 1005–1017. study of people’s perceptions of prejudice. In one portion of this multifaceted study, all participants were given a pretest to assess their levels of depression. No significant differences in depression were found between the experimental and control groups during the pretest. Participants in the experimental group were then asked to read an article suggesting that prejudice against their own racial group is severe and pervasive, while participants in the control group were asked to read an article suggesting that prejudice against a racial group *other than* their own is severe and pervasive. Upon measuring depression scores during the posttest period, the researchers discovered that those who had received the experimental stimulus (the article citing prejudice against their same racial group) reported greater depression than those in the control group. This is just one of many examples of social scientific experimental research.

In addition to the classic experimental design, there are two other ways of designing experiments that are considered to fall within the purview of “true” experiments (Babbie, 2010; Campbell & Stanley, 1963).Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; Campbell, D., & Stanley, J. (1963). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally. They are the Solomon four-group design and the posttest-only control group design. In the former, four groups exist. Two groups are treated as they would be in a classic experiment. Another group receives the stimulus and is then given the posttest. The remaining group does not receive the stimulus but is given the posttest. Table 3.5.2.1 "Solomon Four-Group Design" illustrates the features of each of the four groups in the Solomon four-group design.

Table 3.5.2.1:Solomon Four-Group Design

	Pretest	Stimulus	Posttest	No stimulus
Group 1	X	X	X	
Group 2	X		X	X
Group 3		X	X	

	Pretest	Stimulus	Posttest	No stimulus
Group 4			X	X

Finally, the posttest only control group is also considered a “true” experimental design though it lacks any pretest group. In this design, participants are assigned to either an experimental or a control group. Individuals are then measured on some dependent variable following the administration of an experimental stimulus to the experimental group. In theory, as long as the control and experimental groups have been determined randomly, no pretest is needed.

Time, other resources such as funding, and even one’s topic may limit a researcher’s ability to conduct a true experiment. For researchers in the medical and health sciences, conducting a true experiment could require denying needed treatment to patients, which is a clear ethical violation. Even those whose research may not involve the administration of needed medications or treatments may be limited in their ability to conduct a classic experiment. In social scientific experiments, for example, it might not be equitable or ethical to provide a large financial or other reward only to members of the experimental group. When random assignment of participants into experimental and control groups is not feasible, researchers may turn to a **preexperimental design** (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).Campbell, D., & Stanley, J. (1963). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally. However, this type of design comes with some unique disadvantages, which we’ll describe as we review the preexperimental designs available.

If we wished to measure the impact of some natural disaster, for example, Hurricane Katrina, we might conduct a preexperiment by identifying an experimental group from a community that experienced the hurricane and a control group from a similar community that had not been hit by the hurricane. This study design, called a **static group comparison**, has the advantage of including a comparison control group that did not experience the stimulus (in this case, the hurricane) but the disadvantage of containing experimental and control groups that were determined by a factor or factors other than random assignment. As you might have guessed from our example, static group comparisons are useful in cases where a researcher cannot control or predict whether, when, or how the stimulus is administered, as in the case of natural disasters.

In cases where the administration of the stimulus is quite costly or otherwise not possible, a **one-shot case study** design might be used. In this instance, no pretest is administered, nor is a control group present. In our example of the study of the impact of Hurricane Katrina, a researcher using this design would test the impact of Katrina only among a community that was hit by the hurricane and not seek out a comparison group from a community that did not experience the hurricane. Researchers using this design must be extremely cautious about making claims regarding the effect of the stimulus, though the design could be useful for exploratory studies aimed at testing one’s measures or the feasibility of further study.

Finally, if a researcher is unlikely to be able to identify a sample large enough to split into multiple groups, or if he or she simply doesn’t have access to a control group, the researcher might use a **one-group pre-/posttest** design. In this instance, pre- and posttests are both taken but, as stated, there is no control group to which to compare the experimental group. We might be able to study of the impact of Hurricane Katrina using this design if we’d been collecting data on the impacted communities prior to the hurricane. We could then collect similar data after the hurricane. Applying this design involves a bit of serendipity and chance. Without having collected data from impacted communities prior to the hurricane, we would be unable to employ a one-group pre-/posttest design to study Hurricane Katrina’s impact.

Table 3.5.2.2 "Preexperimental Designs" summarizes each of the preceding examples of preexperimental designs.

Table 3.5.2.2:Preexperimental Designs

	Pretest	Posttest	Experimental group	Control group
One-shot case study		X	X	
Static group comparison		X	X	X
One-group pre-/posttest	X	X	X	

As implied by the preceding examples where we considered studying the impact of Hurricane Katrina, experiments do not necessarily need to take place in the controlled setting of a lab. In fact, many applied researchers rely on experiments to assess the impact and effectiveness of various programs and policies. You might recall our discussion of the police experiment described in Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory". It is an excellent example of an applied experiment. Researchers did not “subject”

participants to conditions in a lab setting; instead, they applied their stimulus (in this case, arrest) to some subjects in the field and they also had a control group in the field that did not receive the stimulus (and therefore were not arrested).

Finally, a review of some of the strengths and weaknesses of experiments as a method of data collection is in order. A strength of this method, particularly in cases where experiments are conducted in lab settings, is that the researcher has substantial control over the conditions to which participants are subjected. Experiments are also generally easier to replicate than are other methods of data collection. Again, this is particularly true in cases where an experiment has been conducted in a lab setting.

As sociologists, who are especially attentive to how social *context* shapes social life, are likely to point out, a disadvantage of experiments is that they are rather artificial. How often do real-world social interactions occur in the same way that they do in a lab? Experiments that are conducted in applied settings may not be as subject to artificiality, though then their conditions are less easily controlled. Experiments also present a few unique concerns regarding validity. Problems of **external validity** might arise when the conditions of an experiment don't adequately represent those of the world outside the boundaries of the experiment. In the case of McCoy and Major's (2003)McCoy, S. K., & Major, B. (2003). Group identification moderates emotional response to perceived prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *29*, 1005–1017. research on prejudice described earlier in this section, for example, the questions to ask with regard to external validity are these: Can we say with certainty that the stimulus applied to the experimental group resembles the stimuli that people are likely to encounter in their real lives outside of the lab? Will reading an article on prejudice against one's race in a lab have the same impact that it would outside of the lab? This is not to suggest that experimental research is not or cannot be valid, but experimental researchers must always be aware that external validity problems can occur and be forthcoming in their reports of findings about this potential weakness. Concerns about **internal validity** also arise in experimental designs. These have to do with our level of confidence about whether the stimulus actually produced the observed effect or whether some other factor, such as other conditions of the experiment or changes in participants over time, may have produced the effect.

In sum, the potential strengths and weaknesses of experiments as a method of data collection in social scientific research include the following:

Table 3.5.2.3:Strengths and Weaknesses of Experimental Research

Strengths	Weaknesses
Researcher control	Artificiality
Reliability	Unique concerns about internal and external validity

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Experiments are designed to test hypotheses under controlled conditions.
- True experimental designs differ from preexperimental designs.
- Preexperimental designs each lack one of the core features of true experimental designs.
- Experiments enable researchers to have great control over the conditions to which participants are subjected and are typically easier to replicate than other methods of data collection.
- Experiments come with some degree of artificiality and may run into problems of external or internal validity.

EXERCISES

1. Taking into consideration your own research topic of interest, how might you conduct an experiment to learn more about your topic? Which experiment type would you use, and why?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the sociological critique that experiments are artificial? Why or why not? How important is this weakness? Do the strengths of experimental research outweigh this drawback?
3. Be a research participant! The Social Psychology Network offers many online opportunities to participate in social psychological experiments. Check them out at http://www.socialpsychology.org/expts.htm.

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3.5.3: Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define *ethnomethodology* and describe its purpose.
2. Define and describe *conversation analysis*.

Though not unique methods of data *collection* per se, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are unique enough, and prominent enough in sociology, that they warrant some dedicated attention in this text. **Ethnomethodology** refers to the study of everyday reality. Rather than assume that the purpose of social science is to understand some objective reality, ethnomethodologists investigate how people construct, prolong, and maintain their realities. The term *ethnomethodology* was coined by sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967),Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. who, as described in his 2011 obituary, was a "sociologist who delved into the minutiae of everyday life" (Lynch, 2011).Lynch, M. (2011, July 13). Harold Garfinkel obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jul/13/harold-garfinkel-obituary Ethnomethodology's emphasis on the everyday, and on ordinary people's methods for producing order in their social worlds, is perhaps its most distinctive characteristic.

An example of ethnomethodological research is C. M. Scharff's (2008)Scharff, C. M. (2008). Doing class: A discursive and ethnomethodological approach. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *5*, 331–343. study of how young feminist women "do" social class. In her study, Scharff examines data from interviews with 40 German and British young women to understand how they "think, talk, and feel about feminism" (p. 334). By focusing in on language, talk, and interaction, Scharff argues that her account is ethnomethodological in nature. Kevin Whitehead (2009)Whitehead, K. (2009). "Categorizing the categorizer": The management of racial common sense in interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *72*, 325–342. also takes an ethnomethodological approach in his study of the social organization of race. In Whitehead's words, he considers "one mechanism by which racial categories, racial 'common sense,' and thus the social organization of race itself, are reproduced in interaction" (p. 325).Whitehead, K. (2009). "Categorizing the categorizer": The management of racial common sense in interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *72*, 325–342. To study these processes, Whitehead analyzed the interactions and practices of participants in an employment "race training" workshop and found that individuals use race as a framework from which to understand their own and others' actions, thereby reproducing race as a relevant social category.

Conversation analysis grew out of ethnomethodology (Schutt, 2006)Schutt, R. K. (2006). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. and thus shares its focus on the *construction* of reality as opposed to the *discovery* of reality. Conversation analysts focus specifically on *talk* in interaction: how talk progresses, how it is facilitated or impeded, how turns are taken in talk, and how these processes both shape and are shaped by social context. In conversation analysis, what people say is just as important as how they say it. Also important are the pauses people take in expressing themselves and how or whether they interrupt themselves or others while talking. Conversation analysts might study recordings of court proceedings or legislative debates to learn about the social construction of law and punishment. They might also study more simple interactions, such as a conversation between two people meeting for coffee.

Some research methods texts include coverage of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in their presentations of qualitative data analysis (Schutt, 2006).Schutt, R. K. (2006). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. It makes sense to do so; both represent unique approaches to analyzing qualitative data. Yet they also rest upon particular ontological and epistemological assumptions that set them apart, in some ways at least, from more traditional mechanisms of analysis such as coding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Ethnomethodologists study everyday reality and how people produce those realities through their presentations of self and interactions with others.
- Conversation analysts focus specifically on the dynamics of talk.

EXERCISES

1. Professor Dhiraj Murthy requires his Introduction to Sociology students to conduct an ethnomethodology exercise to help them understand the sociological, and very social, aspects of "everyday activities." To understand how these activities are social, Murthy asks students to engage in some activity that interrupts the "natural facts of life" (Garfinkel's words). Read

about their experiences here: http://learn.bowdoin.edu/sociology/soc101/?p=68. What do these students' reports tell us about how "everyday activities" are also social activities?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Utilize statistical software to organize, clean, and run descriptive and inferential analysis of data.

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- 4.2: Data
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4.1: TOOLS (SPSS)

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4.1.1: Getting Started with SPSS

Downloading a Data File

To open one of the SPSS system files (those with names ending in ".sav") that accompany POWERMUTT, open your browser, go to http://www.csupomona.edu/~jlkorey/POWERMUTT/downloads.html, click on the file you want, and save it. If SPSS is loaded on your computer, you may be able to open a system file in SPSS by double-clicking on it after you have downloaded and saved it.

Opening SPSS

Alternatively, you can open SPSS first, then open a system file within it. If there is a shortcut to SPSS on your desktop, double-click it. If not, click on “Start” and “All Programs.” Find SPSS and open it. There are two ways that you can then open a file within SPSS.

1) You may see a dialog box asking “What would you like to do?” If you wish to use this box to open a file, either double click on the file under “Open an existing data source,” or "Open another type of file." Click on "OK." This will open another dialog box that you can use to select the file you want.

2) If the initial dialog box does not appear, or if you do not wish to use it (and click on “cancel”), go to the menu bar and click on “File,” “Open,” and “Data.”

You should now see a dialog box called “Open File.” All of the data files used in this project are SPSS system files. You can also import files from a variety of other formats, such as Microsoft Excel. Choose the appropriate type of file from “Files of type:” Use “Look in:” to browse your directories for the file you wish to open, and either double-click on the file or single-click and then click “Open.”

Viewing and Editing a Data File

There are two “views” within SPSS.

“Data View” provides a spreadsheet in which each row represents a case and each column a variable. Though you normally will not wish to do so, you can change the value of a variable for a given case simply by typing in the new value. (More systematic ways to modify the values of variables are explained in the tools describing “Recode” and “Compute.”)

“Variable View” provides more detailed information about each variable in your file, and also allows you to make a number of changes in the ways these variables are described.

In some cases (“Name” and “Label”) you can make changes simply by typing them in. “Name,” not surprisingly, refers to the variable name. In general, variable names may be up to 64 characters long, though in early versions of SPSS the limit was 8 characters. The first character should be a letter. Remaining characters may consist of letters, numbers, or some special characters. Do not include blanks within a name. “Label” is means of providing a more detailed description of a variable, and is very useful in making output easier to read. A label can include blanks and special characters.

For “Width,” “Decimals,” and “Columns”, you can make changes by clicking near the right side of the field, and then clicking the up or down arrow to select the number you want.

“Align” and “Measure” can be changed by clicking on the right side of the field and then making your choice from the drop-down menu that will appear.

Finally, when you click on the right side of a field under “Type,” “Values,” or “Missing,” a dialog box will open up for your use in making changes.

In most cases, the “type” of variable will be numeric. You may also have some variables of another type, most often “string” (i.e., text) variables consisting of letters as well as numbers (for example, in a file containing data about different countries, the names of the countries would constitute a string variable). Most variables are numeric, since most statistical procedures require data that have been coded numerically.

Just as variable names can be labeled to make output easier to read, so too can specific values of a variable be given labels. To add or edit value labels, click on the right side of the field under “Values.” In the resulting dialog box, enter the value, then the value label, then click on “Add.” To remove a value label, select the label, then click on “Remove.”

Specifying missing data is especially important, since SPSS procedures provide you with different ways to treat such data. For each variable, you may specify up to three discrete values as missing, or may specify a range of values and, if you wish, one discrete value as missing. In addition, any blanks in your data will automatically be considered as “system missing” or “sysmis.” The “Missing” feature is especially useful even if the dataset you are using already comes with missing values specified. Whether a particular value should be treated as missing may depend on the specific research question you are asking. For example, if a respondent in a survey identifies with the Libertarian Party, that information is not missing, but you may choose to treat it as such if you are only interested in comparing Democrats and Republicans.

Note: If you are using survey data, you may need to weight cases by a variable included in the dataset to correct for known over or under representation of some categories of respondents.

Changing the Way Information About Variables is Displayed

In the menu bar, click on “Edit,” on “Options...,” and on the “General” tab. For now at least, you can accept most of the default options, but you should decide how you want variables shown when you are carrying out SPSS procedures. Under “Variable Lists,” choose either “Display Names” or “Display Labels.” Also, decide whether you prefer to have variables listed alphabetically or in the order in which they appear in the file (as shown in the “Variable View.”)

It will also probably make your output easier to understand if, while still in “Options,” you click on the “Output” tab and select the following from the four drop-down menus that appear:

1. Names and Labels
2. Values and Labels
3. Names and Labels
4. Values and Labels

Obtaining Information About a Variable

From the menu bar, click on “Utilities.” Clicking on “Variables…” will allow you to scroll through the variables in the dataset, examining them one at a time, while clicking on “File Info” will provide similar information for all of the variables in the dataset.

Analyzing Data and Preparing Charts

The most important parts of SPSS, the parts that provide you with result, are found under the headings of "Analyze" and "Graphs." Specific tools are provided for each of the procedures used in POWERMUTT. See the "Tools" section of the Table of Contents for specifics. A couple of general notes:

- When you use a procedure that you have used before during the same session, SPSS will remember what you did the last time. This can be a great time saver, since you will often want to keep all but one or two of your previous choices. If, however, you want to start all over again, click on the "Reset" button included with most SPSS procedures. This will restore all defaults.
- The SPSS Tools provided by POWERMUTT are not meant to be comprehensive; they provide only minimal information needed to carry out a procedure. Even in completing the exercises in POWERMUTT, you will sometimes need to go beyond the instructions in the Tools. You should also familiarize yourself with the examples found in the POWERMUTT PUPS and other SPSS resources listed below under "Getting Help."
- When producing charts, SPSS includes a powerful "Chart Editor" that you can use to make your charts more interesting, informative, and aesthetically pleasing. Because of time limitations, POWERMUTT Tools and PUPS make only minimal use of this editor but, if you want eye-popping graphics, especially for color presentations (e.g., with PowerPoint), consider experimenting with some of its features.

Copying or Printing Output

SPSS often produces voluminous output. Printing it all is unaesthetic, uneconomical, and evil. Keep the good stuff to print out or to copy and paste into another application such as Microsoft Word.

Select the first portion of output you wish to preserve by clicking on it. Hold down the control (Ctrl) key and select additional portions.

To print the portions you have selected, click on “File” (in the menu bar), and on “Print...” Under “Print range,” make sure that “Selection” is selected. Click on “OK.” Note: before printing your output, it is a good idea to first click on “File” and on “Print

Preview" You may wish to then click on "File" and "Page Setup…" and select "Landscape" rather than "Portrait" for the printing of your output.

You can also copy and paste output. After selecting the portions of your output that you wish to preserve, click on "Edit" (in the tool bar) and on "Copy." Then open your other application, click on "Edit" and on "Paste."

Saving a Data File

If you make any changes to your file and wish to save the revised version, click on "File" and "Save" to replace the original file. To save the new version of the file under a different name (recommended if there is any chance that you might later want to return to the original version), click on "File," and "Save as…." This will open up a dialog box called ": Save Data As…." If you wish to delete some variables, click on "Variables" and deselect the variables you do not wish to retain. The default option is to save the file as an SPSS system file (with a ".sav" extension). If you wish to save the file is some other format, click on the arrow to the right of the "Save as file type:" window, and choose the desired format. Finally, browse until you find the directory in which you wish to store your file, type in a file name in the "File name:" box, and click on "Save."

Getting Help

There are a number of places you can go to get help in using SPSS:

- Within SPSS itself. The best place to find help in using SPSS is within SPSS itself. There you will find:
  - A help button on the menu bar which provides, among other things:
    - "topics" (a table of contents and an index),
    - a tutorial,
    - a "Statistics coach," and
    - a "command syntax reference" (for advanced users)
  - A context-sensitive help button that is available when you open a dialog box.
- Within POWERMUTT.
  - Tools. Each POWERMUTT tool provides a brief explanation of a particular feature of SPSS. The tools are geared to the goals of the POWERMUTT project, and do not attempt to provide comprehensive explanations.
  - Pop Up Protocols (POWERMUTT PUPS). In reading any POWERMUTT topic describing results produced by SPSS, when you see the PUP's paw POWERMUTT PUP (Pop Up Protocol) Button, give it a "high four" with your mouse. A pop up window will display the instructions used to produce that result.
- Elsewhere on the Internet.

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4.2: Data

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4.2.1: Weight Cases

WEIGHT CASES

In working with sample data, investigators will sometimes include a “weight” variable to correct for known over or under representation in the sample. Sometimes the over or under representation will have been done deliberately, as when a small group is over sampled in order to provide enough cases to permit reliable analysis of that group. Sometimes the over or under representation will be discovered after the sample is taken and compared with some known characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. For example, when a survey of public opinion is carried out, it may turn out that the sample is not representative (in terms of age, race, gender, region, etc.) of the overall population as measured in a recent census.

A weight variable can be created using COMPUTE statements. Often, a dataset you are using will already include one or more weight variables.

To weight data by such a variable, click on “Data” (in the menu bar) and “Weight Cases….” Select “Weight cases by,” select a variable in the left window, click on the right arrow, and click on OK.”

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4.2.2: Select Cases

You may wish to carry out analysis on only some of the cases in a data file. Perhaps, in analyzing data from a file on the countries of the world, you wish to limit your inquiry to countries in Latin America.

To select cases based on the values they have for one or more variables, click on “Data” (in the menu bar) and “Select Cases….” Select “If condition is satisfied” and click on “If….” :”). In the window on the right (under “Numeric Expression:”), enter the formula you wish to use to select cases. You can type the formula directly. You can also do so by moving variables into the Numeric Expression window from the list on the left, and/or by selecting arithmetic operations from the keypad provided by SPSS. Then click on “OK.”

Note: Use the following guide for the most common operations:

Table 4.2.2.1:Partial table of operations

SYMBOL	LETTERS	MEANING
+		Plus
-		Minus
*		Multiplied by
/		Divided by
**		Raised to the _____ power
<	LT	Less than
>	GT	Greater than
<=	LE	Less than or equal to
>=	GE	Greater than or equal to
=	EQ	Equal to
&	AND	And
|	OR	Or

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4.2.3: Sort Cases

To sort cases,

To weight data by such a variable, click on “Data” (in the menu bar) and “Sort Cases….” Select one or more variables in the left window and click on the right arrow. Under ""Sort Order," select the radio button next to either "Ascending or Decending," and click on OK.” Note: if you select more than one variable, SPSS will sort on the first variable and, then within each value of that variable, will sort on the second, and so on. You might, for example, wish to sort countries by region and, within region, by population.

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4.3: Transform

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4.3.1: Recode

There are two ways to recode variables, by recoding into the same variables, and by recoding into different variables. The latter is generally preferred, since recoding into the same variables will permanently replace the original values of the variables if the file containing the recoded variables is saved.

Recoding into Different Variables (Note: if you have more than one variable to be recoded in the same way, you may recode them all at once.)

From the menu bar, click on “Transform,” “Recode,” and “Into Different Variables.” Select the variable or variables you wish to recode from the left window of the dialog box, and click on the right arrow. Select one of the variables from the right window and, under “Output Variable,” name the new variable and click on “Change.” You may also wish to provide a label for the new variable at this time.

Optional: If you wish to carry out a recode only for certain cases, click on “If.” This will open up a new dialog box. In the right window, type in the formula describing the cases you wish to recode. (For example, var1 = 1 and var2 >= 3 will recode only those cases for which the value of var1 is 1 and the value of var2 is 3 or more.) Click on “Continue.” All cases except those specified will have the value “sysmis” for the newly created variable(s).

Click on “Old and New Values….” In the new dialog box which is then displayed, select the old value from the left side of the box. On the right side of the box, enter the new value and click on “Add.” When you have recoded all values, click on “Continue,” then on “OK.” Any values not recoded will have the value “sysmis.”

After you have created new recoded variables, you will probably want to supply labels for the values of these variables. See “Viewing and Editing a Data File” in “SPSS: GETTING STARTED.”

Recoding into the Same Variables

From the menu bar, click on “Transform,” “Recode,” and “Into Same Variables.” Select the variable or variables you wish to recode from the left window of the dialog box, and click on the right arrow.

Optional: If you wish to carry out a recode only for certain cases, click on “If.” This will open up a new dialog box. In the right window, type in the formula describing the cases you wish to recode. (For example, var1 = 1 and var2 >= 3 will recode only those cases for which the value of var1 is 1 and the value of var2 is 3 or more.) Click on “Continue.” All cases except those specified will retain their original values.

Click on “Old and New Values….” In the new dialog box which is then displayed, select the old value from the left side of the box. On the right side of the box, enter the new value and click on “Add.” When you have recoded all values, click on “Continue,” then on “OK.” Any values not recoded will remain unchanged.

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4.3.2: Compute

COMPUTE is used to create new variables or to modify the values of existing variables.

From the menu bar, click on “Transform” and “Compute.” In the resulting dialog box, type in the name of the variable you wish to create or modify in the window on the left (under “Target Variable:”). In the window on the right (under “Numeric Expression:”), enter the formula you wish to use to create or modify the variable. You can type the formula directly. You can also do so by moving variables into the Numeric Expression window from the list on the left, and/or by selecting arithmetic operations from the keypad provided by SPSS. Then click on “OK.”

Note: Use the following guide for the most common operations:

Table 4.3.2.1: Partial table of operations

SYMBOL	LETTERS	MEANING
+		Plus
-		Minus
*		Multiplied by
/		Divided by
**		Raised to the _____ power
<	LT	Less than
>	GT	Greater than
<=	LE	Less than or equal to
>=	GE	Greater than or equal to
=	EQ	Equal to
&	AND	And
|	OR	Or

Suppose, for example, that you had a dataset for the American states containing a variable called “kerry” (representing the number of votes received by John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election), and a variable called “bush” (the number received by George W. Bush), and you wished to create a new variable representing the percentage of the two-party vote received by Kerry. You could type “pctkerry” in the left widow, and enter “100*kerry/(kerry+bush)” in the right window.

Sometimes, you may wish to create or modify a variable for only come cases. If so, click on “IF” before clicking on “OK.” Then click on “Include if case satisfies condition,” and enter the formula for that condition in the right window and then click on “Continue.”

For example, if you wished to create a new variable to represent, in each state, the winning candidate’s percentage of the two-party vote, you could do so with a combination of two COMPUTE operations. In the first, you would create a new target variable (calling it, let us say. “pctwin”), enter the expression “100*kerry/(kerry+bush),” click on “IF” and enter the expression “kerry>bush.” In the second, the main numeric expression would be “100*bush/(kerry+bush)” and the “if” condition would be “bush>kerry.”

Any time that you are creating a new variable with a combination of COMPUTE operations (or a mix of COMPUTE and RECODE operations, be sure that you have defined a numeric expression for all cases. Any cases not defined will automatically be assigned a system missing (sysmis) value.

In variable view, add variable labels and, if appropriate, value labels and missing values.

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4.4: Analyze

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4.4.1: Frequencies

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Descriptive Statistics,” and on “Frequencies….” In the left window, select the variable(s) you wish to analyze, and click on the right arrow. If you wish to accept all defaults, simply click on “OK.”

If you wish to suppress frequency tables, uncheck “Display frequency tables” before clicking on “OK.”

There are a number of additional options you can choose before clicking on “OK.” Click on “Statistics,” “Charts,” and/or “Format,” check the optional features you would like, then click on “Continue” to return to the main dialog box. (I strongly recommend, however, that you not use Frequencies to produce pie or bar charts, but instead use clustered pie and bar charts, which provide you with much more control over the output.)

Note: If you suppress frequency tables, and choose the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum statistics, FREQUENCIES will give you the same results you would get by running DESCRIPTIVES with all the default options.

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4.4.2: Descriptives

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Descriptive Statistics,” and on “Descriptives….” In the left window, select the variable(s) you wish to analyze, and click on the right arrow. If you wish to accept all defaults, simply click on “OK.”

In addition, there are a number of additional options you can choose before clicking on “OK.” Click on “Statistics,” “Charts,” and/or “Format,” check the optional features you would like, then click on “Continue” to return to the main dialog box.

SPSS can convert each of the variables you have analyzed into standard (z) scores. If you wish to save these scores as variables, check “Save standardized scores as variables” before clicking on “OK.”

By default, DESCRIPTIVES provides, for each variable selected, the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum. To choose additional statistics, delete some of those provided by default, or change the order in which variables are listed in your output, click on “Options” and check the options you desire. Then click on “Continue” and “OK.”

For any interval or ratio variable, DESCRIPTIVES can also create z-scores. Just check “Save standardized scores as variable” in the main dialog box.

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4.4.3: Explore

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Descriptive Statistics,” and on “Explore….” In the left window, select the variable(s) you wish to analyze, and click on the top right arrow (next to “Dependent List:”).

If you wish to obtain separate plots and statistics for different subgroups of cases, select the variables needed to define your groups from the list in the left window, and click on the second right arrow (next to “”Factor List:”).

By default, EXPLORE produces a stem and leaf plot. If you wish a histogram instead of or in addition to the stem and leaf plot, click on “Plots…,” make your selections, and click on “Continue.”

EXPLORE provides three alternatives for handling missing data. Listwise deletion means that if a case has missing data for any of the variables selected, it will be deleted from all calculations. This insures that all statistics will be based on the same cases, but will eliminate a case from all calculations even if it is missing data for only one or two variables. Another option is pairwise deletion. Pairwise deletion means that each statistic will be based on all case with non-missing values for the two variables in question. This has the advantage of using as much information as possible for the calculation of each statistic. The disadvantage is that the statistics may not be based on the same subset of cases, since different cases may be missing data for different variables. A final alternative is to report missing values. If you only have a small proportion of missing data, it will not make much difference which option you choose. If you have a lot of missing data, no option is very satisfactory. The default option for EXPLORE is listwise deletion. If you wish to use either of the alternatives just described, click on “Options” and select the option you prefer.

Click on “Continue” (if you have not already done so) and on “OK.”

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4.4.4: Crosstabs

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Descriptive Statistics,” and on “Crosstabs….” In the left window, select the variable(s) you wish to place in the rows, and click on the top right arrow. Then select the variable(s) you wish to place in the columns, and click on the second right arrow. If you have one or more control variables, select them and click on the third right arrow. For second and subsequent layers of controls, click on “Next” before selecting the variable(s). Note: CROSSTABS will produce tables for each combination of variables specified. For example, if you select two row and two columns variables, SPSS will generate four tables. If you wish to accept all defaults (which will provide the number of cases in each table cell), simply click on “OK.”

If you want to “Display clustered bar charts,” and/or “Suppress tables,” check the appropriate boxes before clicking on “OK.” (I strongly recommend, however, that you not use Crosstabs to produce clustered bar charts, but instead use clustered bar charts, which provide you with much more control over the output.)

There are a number of additional options you can choose before clicking on “OK.”

To obtain measures of statistical significance and/or association, click on “Statistics” and check the appropriate boxes, then click on “Continue.” Note the following:

- If one or both of your variables is nominal, use chi-square as the measure of statistical significance. If both your independent and dependent variables are ordinal, use the “Approx. Sig.” (i.e., approximate significance) that comes with the measure of association you are using. (This measure is actually a t-test.)
- If you ask for “chi-square,” you will be given several chi-square tests. The most common (and the one described in the statistical significance topic) is “Pearson’s chi-square.” (If you have a table consisting of two rows and two columns, use the “Continuity Correction,” also known as “Yates’ correction.” This is especially important for small samples; for large samples, the correction will not make much difference.)
- If the probability of a test for statistical significance is given as “.000” this does not really mean that there is a zero probability of the relationship occurring by chance. Rather, it means that the probability is less than .0005.
- Some measures of association (Lambda, Goodman and Kruskal tau, the Uncertainty Coefficient, and Somers’ d) are “asymmetric” measures. Since SPSS does not know which of your variables is dependent, it will calculate the statistics both ways (and, except for Goodman and Kruskal tau, will also provide a “symmetric” average of the two). It is up to you to know which of your variables is the dependent variable, and to choose the appropriate measure accordingly.

To obtain additional cell information, and/or suppress “observed cell counts,” click on “Cells,” check or uncheck the appropriate boxes, then click on “Continue.” Note: be sure to percentage in the direction of the independent variables. If you have placed the independent variables in the columns, check “Column” percentages.

By default, table rows are displayed in ascending order. To display rows in descending order, click on “Format,” select “Descending,” then click on “Continue.”

Note: CROSSTABS provides the option of producing clustered bar charts. Avoid it, since it allows bars to represent only raw counts, not percentages. Instead, use the more flexible BAR CHART tool.

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4.4.5: Reliability Analysis

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Scale,” and on “Reliabilty Analysis….” In the left window, select the variables that make up the scale you wish to analyze, and click on the right arrow.

Next to "Model:," choose the type of analsis you wish to perform (e.g., "Alpha" for Cronbach's alpha). Click on "OK."

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4.4.6: T-tests

Paired-samples t-tests

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Compare Means,” and on “Paired-Samples T Test..." In the left window, select both of the variables you wish to compare, then click on the right arrow. Click on additional pairs of variables if you wish to do additional comparisons. Click on "OK."

Independent-samples t-tests

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Compare Means,” and on “Independent-Samples T Test..." In the left window, select the variable or variables you wish to test, then click on the top right arrow. In the left window, select the variable that will define your two groups, then click on the second right arrow. Click on "Define Groups." Enter the values used to define each group. (For example, if you have a variable that classifies people by political party, and you wish to compare Republicans, coded as "1," and Democrats, coded as "5," enter these values.) To define the two groups, you may wish to recode a variable before doing a t test. Click on "OK.

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4.4.7: Compare Means

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Compare Means,” and on “Means….” In the left window, select the continuous variable (usually the dependent variable) you wish to analyze, and click on the top right arrow. Then select the categorical variable(s) (usually the independent variable(s)) you wish to use as independent variables, and click on the second right arrow. If you wish to analyze two or more categorical variables simultaneously (e.g., “Northeast Republicans,” “Northeast Democrats,” etc.), click on “Next” between the two right windows, select your second layer of categorical variables, and click on the second right arrow. Do the same for any additional layers of categorical variables. Note: COMPARE MEANS will produce descriptive statistics for each combination of variables specified, but will only carry out analysis of variance and a test for linearity for first layer variables.

Click on “Options….” By default, COMPARE MEANS provides means, number of cases, and standard deviations, but a number of additional statistics are available. Add or remove statistics by selecting the statistic(s) you wish to add or remove and clicking on the arrow in the center of the box. Check “Anova table and eta” and/or “Test for linearity” as desired. Click on “Continue” and on “OK.”

If you want to “Display clustered bar charts,” and/or “Suppress tables,” check the appropriate boxes before clicking on “OK.”

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4.4.8: Correlate

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Correlate,” and on “Bivariate….” In the left window, select the variables you wish to analyze, and click on the top right arrow. Select one or more of the correlation coefficients. The default is Pearson’s r. Select either a one or two-tailed test of statistical significance. The default is a two-tailed test, but a one-tailed test is appropriate for hypotheses that predict whether a relationship will be positive or negative. Since this will usually be the case, you will probably want a one-tailed test.

Click on “Options….” You may select any the optional statistics that are available. By default, CORRELATE provides for pairwise deletion of missing data. You may instead select listwise deletion. Pairwise deletion means that each correlation will be based on all case with non-missing values for the two variables in question. This has the advantage of using as much information as possible for the calculation of each coefficient. The disadvantage is that the coefficients may not be based on the same subset of cases, since different cases may be missing data for different variables. Listwise deletion means that if a case has missing data for any of the variables in the correlation matrix, it will be deleted from all calculations. This insures that all coefficients will be based on the same cases, but will eliminate a case from all calculations even if it is missing data for only one or two variables in the correlation matrix. If you only have a small proportion of missing data, it will not make much difference which option you choose. If you have a lot of missing data, neither option is very satisfactory.

When you have finished selecting your options, click on “Continue” and on “OK.”

Output will be in the form of a matrix showing the correlation between each variable you have selected and every other variable. For each correlation, you will also be given the number of cases on which it is based and the significance level. If the significance level is given as “.000” this does not really mean that there is a zero probability of the relationship occurring by chance. Rather, it means that the probability is less than .0005.

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4.4.9: Regression

From the menu bar, click on “Analyze,” then on “Regression,” and on “Linear….” In the left window, select the dependent variable you wish to analyze, and click on the top right arrow. Then select your independent variables, and click on the second right arrow.

You can use “Selection Variable” in much the same way as “Select Cases.” If you wish to include only some cases in the analysis, select the variable you will use as a filter, click on the third right arrow, click on “Rule…,” define the rule you wish to use to select cases for analysis, and click on “Continue.”

REGRESSION provides three alternatives for handling missing data. Listwise deletion means that if a case has missing data for any of the variables in the correlation matrix, it will be deleted from all calculations. This insures that all coefficients will be based on the same cases, but will eliminate a case from all calculations even if it is missing data for only one or two variables in the correlation matrix. Another option is pairwise deletion. Pairwise deletion means that each correlation will be based on all case with non-missing values for the two variables in question. This has the advantage of using as much information as possible for the calculation of each coefficient. The disadvantage is that the coefficients may not be based on the same subset of cases, since different cases may be missing data for different variables. A final alternative is to substitute mean values for any missing data, which may or may not make sense depending on how your data is structured. If you only have a small proportion of missing data, it will not make much difference which option you choose. If you have a lot of missing data, no option is very satisfactory. The default option for REGRESSION is listwise deletion. If you wish to use either of the alternatives just described, click on “Options” and select the option you prefer.

“Options” can also be used to save residual scores as a new variable.

Click on “Continue” (if you have not already done so) and on “OK.”

Output will include the statistical significance (“Sig.”) of the overall equation, and of each term on the right side of the equation. If the significance level is given as “.000” this does not really mean that there is a zero probability of the relationship occurring by chance. Rather, it means that the probability is less than .0005. Note also that the significance levels given are for “two-tailed tests,” that is, for hypotheses that predict a relationship, but do not specify whether the relationship is positive or negative. When an hypothesis correctly predicts the direction of the relationship, a “one-tailed” test is appropriate. The significance level (the risk that the relationship is due to chance) for a one-tailed test is half that of a two-tailed test. For example, if the two-tailed probability that the relationship is due to chance is .04, the one-tailed probability is only .02.

The “Constant” described in the output is the “a” coefficient (the Y intercept).

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4.5: Graphs

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4.5.1: Editing Charts

The Interactive Graph Object editor includes a wide variety of features (some of which are context specific) you can use to make your graph more readable and aesthetic. The best way to learn the Chart Editor is by test driving it.

To open the editor, double-click on the graph, or right-click, click on “Edit Content ,” and “In Separate Window .”

There are often several ways to accomplish the same thing with the editor. In many cases, you can bring up the relevant dialog box simply by double-clicking on the graph or on the specific part of the graph you wish to edit, then right-clicking. You can also use the task bars. If these are not visible, click on “View” in the menu bar and select all the toolbars.

After leaving the editor (by clicking your mouse outside the chart), you can copy and past your chart into other applications, such as MS Word, Excel, or PowerPoint.

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4.5.2: Histogram

Note: In addition to this procedure, histograms can also be generated using “Descriptives” or “Explore.”

From the menu bar, click on “Graphs,” "Legacy Dialogs ," and "Histogram...." In the left window, select the variable you wish to analyze, and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.

If you wish to superimpose a normal curve on the histogram, check the box next to "Display normal curve."

Click on the “Titles” tab and enter the title(s) you wish for your chart.

Click on "Continue" and "OK."

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4.5.3: BoxPlot

From the menu bar, click on “Graphs,” "Legacy Dialogs," and "Boxplot."

To analyze one variable, with a separate boxplot for each value of a categorical variable:

- Click on "Simple" and "Summaries for groups of cases."
- In the left window, select the variable you wish to analyze, and drag and drop it into the first window on the right.
- In the left window, select the categorical variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.
- If you wish to label outliers and extreme cases: in left window, select the variable whose values you wish to use as labels and drag and drop it into the third window on the right.

To analyze one variable, broken down by two different categorical variables:

- Click on "Clustered" and "Summaries for groups of cases."
- In the left window, select the variable you wish to analyze, and drag and drop it into the first window on the right.
- In the left window, select the first categorical variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.
- In the left window, select the second categorical variable and drag and drop it into the third window on the right.
- If you wish to label outliers and extreme cases: in left window, select the variable whose values you wish to use as labels and drag and drop it into the third window on the right.

To compare two or more variables::

- Click on "Simple" and "Summaries of separate variables."
- In the left window, select the variables you wish to analyze, and drag and drop them into the first window on the right.
- If you wish to label outliers and extreme cases: in left window, select the variable whose values you wish to use as labels and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.

To compare two or more variables, with a separate boxplot for each value of a categorical variable:

- Click on "Clustered" and "Summaries of separate variables."
- In the left window, select the variables you wish to analyze, and drag and drop them into the first window on the right.
- In the left window, select the categorical variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.
- If you wish to label outliers and extreme cases: in left window, select the variable whose values you wish to use as labels and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.

Click on "OK."

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4.5.4: Line Chart

From the menu bar, click on “Graphs,” "Legacy Dialogs," and "Line...."

To create a chart with one line for all cases:

- Click on "Simple," "Summaries for groups of cases."and "Define."
- Click on "Other Statistic (e.g., mean)."
- In left window, select your dependent variable and drag and drop it into the first window on the right.
- In left window, select your independent variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.

To create a chart with a separate line for each of two or more subgroups of cases:

- Click on "Multiple," Summaries for groups of cases."and "Define."
- Click on "Other Statistic (e.g., mean)."
- In left window, select your dependent variable and drag and drop it into the first window on the right.
- In left window, select your independent variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right.
- In left window, select the variable defining the subgroups of cases you wish to examine and drag and drop it into the third window on the right.

Click on the “Titles” tab and enter the title(s) you wish for your chart.

Click on "Continue" and "OK."

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4.5.5: Scatterplot

From the menu bar, click on “Graphs,” "Legacy Dialogs ," and "Scatter/Dot...."

Click on "Simple Scatter" and "Define."

In left window, select your dependent variable and drag and drop it into the first window on the right (under "Y Axis:").

In left window, select your independent variable and drag and drop it into the second window on the right (under "X Axis:").

If you wish to create a legend coding cases by a categorical variable, in left window, select the variable defining the subgroups and drag and drop it into the third window on the right (under "Set Markers by:").

If you wish to label individual cases, select the variable that contains the labels and drag and drop it into the last window on the right (under "Label Cases By:").

Double click on chart to open Chart Editor; click on "Elements" and "Fit Line at Total."

In the Properties window, click on "Close."

Click on the “Titles” tab and enter the title(s) you wish for your chart.

Click on "Options"; check "Display chart with case labels."

Click on "Continue" and "OK."

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Demonstrate an ability to apply critical thinking skills to evaluate literature reviews and research databases to find common themes in research design and reporting

5.1: Reading and Understanding Social Research

5.1.1: Reading Reports of Sociological Research

5.1.2: Being a Responsible Consumer of Research

5.1.3: Media Reports of Sociological Research

5.1.4: Sociological Research- It's Everywhere

5.2: Research Methods in the Real World

5.2.1: Chapter Introduction

5.2.2: Doing Research for a Living

5.2.3: Doing Research for a Cause

5.2.4: Public Sociology

5.2.5: Revisiting an Earlier Question- Why Should We Care?

5: Demonstrate an ability to apply critical thinking skills to evaluate literature reviews and research databases to find common themes in research design and reporting is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

5.1: Reading and Understanding Social Research

Sociology in Everyday Life

You might think that sociological research plays a very small role in our day-to-day lives, but once you know what to look for, you will soon discover that it is more a part of our everyday lives than you might have imagined. This is even truer now that you have taken a class in sociological research methods. Having some background in and understanding of the scientific method means that you are now better equipped to understand, question, and critique all kinds of scientific research as many of the basic tenets of good research are similar across disciplines that employ the scientific method. Those tenets include having a well-designed and carefully planned study, having some theoretical grounding and understanding of research that has come before one's own work, and engaging in peer review, to name just a few. In this chapter, we'll consider how to responsibly read research findings and examine areas of everyday life where sociological research may be present, even if it is not immediately visible.

As you read this chapter and Chapter 5.2 "Research Methods in the Real World", you may recall several of the topics and points made in other chapters of this text. The aim in these final chapters is to remind you of the relevance of sociological research and why one might care to know something about it. These chapters are also designed to encourage you to think critically about how sociology does and can shape your everyday life, both in ways you might choose and in ways you might not be aware of.

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5.1.1: Reading Reports of Sociological Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify what one can learn from an article simply by reading its abstract and its acknowledgments.
2. Describe how tables presenting causal relationships are typically presented.
3. Identify several key questions to ask when reading research reports.

By now you should have a good idea about the basic components of sociological research projects. You know how sociological research is designed, and you are familiar with how to frame a review of sociological literature. In Chapter 2.1 "Research Design", we discussed the various components of a research project and presented some tips on how to review literature as you design your own research project. But I hope that you'll find the sociological literature to be of interest and relevance to you beyond figuring out how to summarize and critique it in relation to your research plans. We sociologists like to think the research we do matters, but it cannot matter if our research reports go unread or are not understandable. In this section we'll review some material from Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" regarding sociological literature and we'll consider some additional tips for how to read and understand reports of sociological research.

As mentioned in Chapter 2.1 "Research Design", reading the abstract that appears in most reports of scholarly research will provide you with an excellent, easily digestible review of a study's major findings and of the framework the author is using to position her findings. Abstracts typically contain just a few hundred words, so reading them is a nice way to quickly familiarize yourself with a study. Another thing to look for as you set out to read and comprehend a research report is the author's acknowledgments. Who supported the work by providing feedback or other assistance? If relevant, are you familiar with the research of those who provided feedback on the report you are about to read? Are any organizations mentioned as having supported the research in some way, either through funding or by providing other resources to the researcher? Familiarizing yourself with an author's acknowledgments will give you additional contextual information within which to frame and understand what you are about to read.

Once you have read the abstract and acknowledgments, you could next peruse the discussion section near the end of the report, as suggested in Chapter 2.1 "Research Design". You might also take a look at any tables that are included in the article. A **table** provides a quick, condensed summary of the report's key findings. The use of tables is not limited to one form or type of data, though they are used most commonly in quantitative research. Tables are a concise way to report large amounts of data. Some tables present descriptive information about a researcher's sample. These tables will likely contain frequencies (N) and percentages (%). For example, if gender happened to be an important variable for the researcher's analysis, a descriptive table would show how many and what percent of all study participants are women and how many/what percent are men. Frequencies, or "how many," will probably be listed as *N*, while the percent symbol (%) might be used to indicate percentages.

In a table presenting a causal relationship, independent variable attributes are typically presented in the table's columns, while dependent variable attributes are presented in rows. This allows the reader to scan across a table's rows to see how values on the dependent variable attributes change as the independent variable attribute values change. Tables displaying results of quantitative analysis will also likely include some information about the strength and statistical significance of the relationships presented in the table. These details tell the reader how likely it is that the relationships presented will have occurred simply by chance.

Let's look at a specific example. Table 5.1.1.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work", based on data from my study of older workers, presents the causal relationship between gender and experiencing harassing behaviors at work. In this example, gender is the independent variable and the harassing behaviors listed are the dependent variables.It wouldn't make any sense to say that people's workplace experiences *cause* their gender, so in this example, the question of which is the independent variable and which are the dependent variables has a pretty obvious answer. I have therefore placed gender in the table's columns and harassing behaviors in the table's rows. Reading across the table's top row, we see that 2.9% of women in the sample reported experiencing subtle or obvious threats to their safety at work, while 4.7% of men in the sample reported the same. We can read across each of the rows of the table in this way. Reading across the bottom row, we see that 9.4% of women in the sample reported experiencing staring or invasion of their personal space at work while just 2.3% of men in the sample reported having the same experience.

Of course, we cannot assume that these patterns didn't simply occur by chance. How confident can we be that the findings presented in the table did not occur by chance? This is where tests of statistical significance come in handy. **Statistical significance** tells us the likelihood that the relationships we observe could be caused by something other than chance. While your statistics class will give you more specific details on tests of statistical significance and reading quantitative tables, the important thing to be aware of as a nonexpert reader of tables is that some of the relationships presented will be statistically significant and

others may not be. Tables should provide information about the statistical significance of the relationships presented. When reading a researcher's conclusions, be sure to pay attention to which relationships are statistically significant and which are not.

In Table 5.1.1.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work", you'll see that a *p* value is noted in the last very column of the table. A ***p* value** is a statistical measure of the probability that there is no relationship between the variables under study. Another way of putting this is that the *p* value provides guidance on whether or not we should reject the null hypothesis. The **null hypothesis** is simply the assumption that no relationship exists between the variables in question. In Table 5.1.1.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work", we see that for the first behavior listed, the *p* value is 0.623. This means that there is a 62.3% chance that the null hypothesis is correct in this case. In other words, it seems likely that any relationship between observed gender and experiencing threats to safety at work in this sample is simply due to chance.

In the final row of the table, however, we see that the *p* value is 0.039. In other words, there is a 3.9% chance that the null hypothesis is correct. Thus we can be somewhat more confident than in the preceding example that there may be some relationship between a person's gender and his experiencing the behavior noted in this row. We might say that this finding is significant at the .05 level. This means that the probability that the relationship between gender and experiencing staring or invasion of personal space at work is due to sampling error alone is less than 5 in 100. Notice that I'm hedging my bets here by using words like *somewhat* and *may be*. When testing hypotheses, social scientists generally couch their findings in terms of rejecting the null hypothesis rather than making bold statements about the relationships observed in their tables. You can learn more about creating tables, reading tables, and tests of statistical significance in a class focused exclusively on statistical analysis. For now, I hope this brief introduction to reading tables will give you more confidence in your ability to read and understand the quantitative tables you encounter while reading reports of sociological research.

Table 5.1.1.1: Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work

Behavior Experienced at work	Women	Men	*p* value
Subtle or obvious threats to your safety	2.9%	4.7%	0.623
Being hit, pushed, or grabbed	2.2%	4.7%	0.480
Comments or behaviors that demean your gender	6.5%	2.3%	0.184
Comments or behaviors that demean your age	13.8%	9.3%	0.407
Staring or invasion of your personal space	9.4%	2.3%	0.039
Note: Sample size was 138 for women and 43 for men.			

Having read the tables in a research report, along with the abstract, acknowledgments, and discussion in the report, you are finally ready to read the report in its entirety. As you read a research report, there are several questions you can ask yourself about each section, from abstract to conclusion. Those questions are summarized in Table 5.1.1.2 "Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports". Keep in mind that the questions covered here are designed to help you, the reader, to think critically about the research you come across and to get a general understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and key takeaways from a given study. I hope that by considering how you might respond to the following questions while reading research reports, you'll feel confident that you could describe the report to others and discuss its meaning and impact with them.

Table 5.1.1.2: Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports

Report section	Questions worth asking
Abstract	What are the key findings? How were those findings reached? What framework does the researcher employ?
Acknowledgments	Who are this study's major stakeholders? Who provided feedback? Who provided support in the form of funding or other resources?
Introduction	How does the author frame his or her research focus? What other possible ways of framing the problem exist? Why might the author have chosen this particular way of framing the problem?

Report section	Questions worth asking
Literature review	How selective does the researcher appear to have been in identifying relevant literature to discuss? Does the review of literature appear appropriately extensive? Does the researcher provide a critical review?
Sample	Was probability sampling or nonprobability sampling employed? What is the researcher's sample? What is the researcher's population? What claims will the researcher be able to make based on the sample? What are the sample's major strengths and major weaknesses?
Data collection	How were the data collected? What do you know about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the method employed? What other methods of data collection might have been employed, and why was this particular method employed? What do you know about the data collection strategy and instruments (e.g., questions asked, locations observed)? What *don't* you know about the data collection strategy and instruments?
Data analysis	How were the data analyzed? Is there enough information provided that you feel confident that the proper analytic procedures were employed accurately?
Results	What are the study's major findings? Are findings linked back to previously described research questions, objectives, hypotheses, and literature? Are sufficient amounts of data (e.g., quotes and observations in qualitative work, statistics in quantitative work) provided in order to support conclusions drawn? Are tables readable?
Discussion/conclusion	Does the author generalize to some population beyond her or his sample? How are these claims presented? Are claims made supported by data provided in the results section (e.g., supporting quotes, statistical significance)? Have limitations of the study been fully disclosed and adequately addressed? Are implications sufficiently explored?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In tables presenting causal relationships, the independent variable is typically presented in the table's columns while the dependent variables are presented in the table's rows.
- When reading a research report, there are several key questions you should ask yourself for each section of the report.

EXERCISES

1. Find a table in a research report of your choosing. Challenge yourself to summarize the relationships represented by the table. Check your work by reading the Findings section of the article.
2. Read a scholarly article from start to finish, answering the questions outlined in Table 5.1.1.2 "Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports" as you read through each section.

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5.1.2: Being a Responsible Consumer of Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVCES

1. Identify what one needs to do to be a responsible consumer of research.

Being a responsible consumer of research requires that you take seriously your identity as a social scientist. Now that you are familiar with how to conduct research and how to read the results of others' research, you have some responsibility to put your knowledge and skills to use. Doing so is in part a matter of being able to distinguish what you do know based on the information provided by research findings from what you do not know. It is also a matter of having some awareness about what you can and cannot reasonably know as you encounter research findings.

When assessing social scientific findings, think about what information has been provided to you. In a scholarly journal article, you will presumably be given a great deal of information about the researcher's method of data collection, her or his sample, and information about how the researcher identified and recruited research participants. All these details provide important contextual information that can help you assess the researcher's claims. If, on the other hand, you come across some discussion of social scientific research in a popular magazine or newspaper, chances are that you will not find the same level of detailed information that you would find in a scholarly journal article. In this case, what you do and do not know is more limited than in the case of a scholarly journal article.

Also take into account whatever information is provided about a study's funding source. Most funders want, and in fact require, that recipients acknowledge them in publications. But more popular press may leave out a funding source. In this Internet age, it can be relatively easy to obtain information about how a study was funded. If this information is not provided in the source from which you learned about a study, it might behoove you to do a quick search on the web to see if you can learn more about a researcher's funding. Findings that seem to support a particular political agenda, for example, might have more or less weight once you know whether and by whom a study was funded.

There is some information that even the most responsible consumer of research cannot know. Because researchers are ethically bound to protect the identities of their subjects, for example, we will never know exactly who participated in a given study. Researchers may also choose not to reveal any personal stakes they hold in the research they conduct. While researchers may "start where they are," a process outlined in Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", we cannot know for certain whether or how researchers are personally connected to their work unless they choose to share such details. Neither of these "unknowables" is necessarily problematic, but having some awareness of what you may never know about a study does provide important contextual information from which to assess what one can "take away" from a given report of findings.

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Being a responsible consumer of research means giving serious thought to and understanding what you do know, what you don't know, what you can know, and what you can't know.

EXERCISE

Find a report of scholarly research in a newspaper. What do you know from the report? What don't you know? How might you find the answers to your remaining questions?

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5.1.3: Media Reports of Sociological Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Cite the major differences between scholarly and media reports of sociological research.
- Identify the kinds of questions that may remain unanswered in media reports of sociological research.

As you have probably already gathered, we are likely to encounter sociological research in the news and other media. For example, check out the American Sociological Association's media coverage links (http://www.asanet.org/press/media_coverage_highlights.cfm). There you'll see that for just one study, on the consequences of parental divorce for child development (Kim, 2011),Kim, H. S. (2011). Consequences of parental divorce for child development. *American Sociological Review, 76*, 487–511. there were 170 news articles describing the study and its findings over the course of one month, June 2011. This particular study provides a good example of the difference between the information provided about a study in a scholarly journal article and the media's coverage of the same study.

Let's look at some of the differences between the aforementioned study's coverage in the media and its treatment in a scholarly journal. First, watch the following coverage from *The View*'s August 24, 2011, program: http://theview.abc.go.com/video/hot-topics-effects-divorce-kids. Once you have watched the clip, ask yourself what you have learned about the study. Who conducted the research described? What are the study's key findings? How many people participated in the study? Who were those participants? What sorts of data were analyzed? Which findings were statistically significant? Also note what questions you still have about the study. Where might you go to get the answers to your questions?

After watching *The View* clip several times, I was able to gather that the study has two key findings: (a) a child is more negatively affected by losing a parent to divorce than by the tension that leads to the breakup, and (b) children's math scores drop after a divorce but reading and "other skills" do not suffer. As far as who participated, I heard that "3-year-olds and so on" were the participants, though I am not certain how *many* of them participated. I also don't know who conducted the study, who (if anyone) provided funding for the study, when the data were collected, and so on. But if you review the article published in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) that reports results of the study, all these questions are answered.

You might be saying to yourself, "So what?" Perhaps you took note that *The View* coverage *does* mention that the study was published in the ASR. If you did notice this, then kudos to you. Because the ASR is a peer-reviewed publication of the American Sociological Association, we should have some confidence that the study is reputable. But we still don't hear all the information that might shape what we choose to take away from this study. For example, a review of the ASR article will tell us that the data come from a sample of people who were in kindergarten from 1998 to 1999. Perhaps that is of little consequence, but we might wish to pause to consider whether or how our cultural social context has shifted since 1998 and how that might impact how kindergartners *today* respond to parental divorce. I am not at all suggesting that only studies whose data are seconds or days old hold value. (If that were the case, I'd say we can safely disregard any of my own publications.) Instead, I want to call your attention to some of the questions you might ask yourself as a responsible consumer of research.

In addition to all the times that sociological research *does* make the news, there are also instances when it does not but probably should. In June 2011, for example, an article on children's gender nonconformity appeared in the *New York Times* (Hoffman).Hoffman, J. (2011, June 10). "Boys will be boys?" Not in these families. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/fashion/new-challenge-for-parents-childrens-gender-roles.html?pagewanted=all The article took the perspective that children's expressions of gender were natural and biologically ingrained. While we cannot say for certain that this isn't true, we *do* know from many years of reputable and highly regarded research by sociologists of gender that gender norms and behaviors are in many cases constructed *socially*, not biologically. That the article omits this perspective and the voices of sociologists who do research in this area is unfortunate—both for *New York Times*' readers and for sociology.

Keeping in mind your knowledge about sociology and sociological research the next time you come across descriptions of sociological research in various media outlets, ask yourself some questions about the research you encounter.

1. Where do you see sociological research described?
2. How is it described?
3. What information is present, and what is missing from the media account of sociological research?
4. How and where might you access the details that are missing?

Keep an eye out for the absence of sociological research as well and consider the following:

1. Are there programs or news stories that might be well served to incorporate sociological research findings?
2. How might the inclusion of sociological research shift the story?

By asking yourself these questions as you go about your daily routine, you will have integrated sociological research into your everyday life.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Media reports of sociological research, while important, may leave key questions about the research unanswered.
- When reading media reports of sociological research, it is useful to follow up your reading by checking the original scholarly source in which the research is reported.

EXERCISES

1. Find a report of scholarly research in a nonscholarly source other than a newspaper. What would you say are the key takeaways reported by the nonscholarly source? Next, find and read a *scholarly* source's report of the same research. What would you say are the key takeaways reported by the scholarly source? How do the takeaways from each source differ? How are they similar? How has your own understanding of the work changed by reading the scholarly report?
2. Find a news story that you think could have be strengthened by the inclusion of sociological research. How might the inclusion of sociological research shift the story?

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5.1.4: Sociological Research- It's Everywhere

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify locations where we might find examples of sociology and sociological research.
2. Describe how having a background in sociological research methods is useful for our everyday encounters with sociology.

A few years ago, I was at home minding my own business and watching one of my favorite shows, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, when sociology made an appearance. The episode, as I recall, centered on a child who was bullied at school because she had two mothers. In the show, the lawyers discuss research on parenting that was published in the *American Sociological Review*.While my search uncovered that the episode to which I'm referring originally aired on NBC on December 6, 2005, I have not been able to unearth the article to which the show's characters refer. The American Sociological Association does note, however, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*'s mention of the journal on its website: http://www.asanet.org/news/2005.cfm.

It's amazing where and how often you might discover sociology rearing its head when you begin to pay attention, look for it, and listen for it. The benefit of having knowledge about sociological research methods is that when sociology does appear in your everyday life, you'll be better equipped to understand those brief mentions than you would be without some background in research methods.

Sometimes we might come across sociological research and not even realize it. As you've seen in the examples described throughout this chapter, there are opportunities every day to encounter sociological research or, at the very least, its effects. Remember our discussion of the Walmart case in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction"? As you may recall, Professor William Bielby testified as a sociologist on behalf of the plaintiffs in the case. The Walmart case is a great example of sociology playing a role in matters of everyday life even when we may not realize it. Sociologists have participated as expert witnesses in numerous other cases as well. As a sociologist who studies workplace harassment, I was once called upon to offer the sociological perspective in sexual harassment suit. Professor Emeritus Lewis Yablonsky (2002)You can read more about the cases that Professor Yablonsky has been involved in in the following article he wrote for the American Sociological Association's newsletter in 2002: Yablonsky, L. (2002, January). Sociologists as expert witnesses in the criminal justice system. *Footnotes*. Retrieved from http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/jan02/fn17.html has been involved in more than 50 cases, providing his expert sociological opinion on cases involving homicide and other forms of violence.

In addition to offering their expert testimony in court cases and law suits, sociologists also play a role in shaping social policy. Professor Valerie Jenness, for example, has consulted with the state of California to help craft corrections policies there, particularly those focused on transgender inmates, sexual assault in correctional facilities, and hate crime statute implementation (http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/Jenness.cfm). Professor Diane Vaughn, an organizational sociologist, participated in the investigation following the space shuttle *Columbia*'s disintegration during reentry in 2003. Vaughn's sociological perspective added a social dimension to the investigation and helped identify the social and cultural factors at NASA that contributed to the *Columbia*'s demise (http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/vaughan.cfm). Finally, Dr. Darlene Iskra's research "had a dramatic impact on national policy" (http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/segal.cfm) when her work on gender discrimination in the military led to legislation that eliminated unequal requirements for men and women personnel serving in Saudi Arabia ("What is a trailblazer?," 2011).What is a trailblazer? Dr. Darlene Iskra, adjunct instructor, sociology, is a Navy pioneer. (2011, July 15). *Columbia College Spotlights*. Retrieved from http://spotlight.ccis.edu/2011/07/what-is-trailblazer.html These are just a few of the many examples of how the sociological perspective and sociological researchers have played a role in shaping our policies.A useful source for additional examples is the American Sociological Association's descriptions of past winners of its prestigious Public Understanding of Sociology Award. Those descriptions can be found at http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public.cfm.

Another way that we might inadvertently come across sociology is when we encounter the ever-popular armchair sociologist. Perhaps you've met some of these folks or even played the role yourself a time or two. Armchair sociologists tend to wax poetic about how society "is" or how various groups of people "are" without having anything more than anecdotal evidence (or perhaps no evidence at all) to support their sweeping claims. Remember the example from Chapter 1.1 "Introduction" about a friend who once proclaimed that "all men lie all the time?" That's a perfect example of armchair sociology. Now that you are equipped with a better understanding of how we know what we know, and in particular how sociologists know what they know, you are well prepared to question the assumptions of the armchair sociologists you meet. And by sharing with others what *you* know about how we "know" things, perhaps you'll even help others break the habit of making unfounded assumptions. Understanding sociological

research methods is excellent preparation for questioning the everyday assumptions that others make. And let's face it; we've all probably made some unfounded assumptions about the way the world works or about what "other" people are like at one time or another.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sociological research appears in many areas of our lives and sometimes in unexpected locations.
- Having an understanding of sociological research methods can be of benefit in areas of your life outside of the classroom.

EXERCISE

1. Find evidence of sociological research in a location where you did not expect to find it or may not have found it if not deliberately seeking it out. Ask two or three of your peers to do the same and then swap stories. Where did you find sociology? How did you find it? What relevance does sociology have to the example that you found? How did your knowledge about research methods help you identify or understand the instance of sociology that you found?

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5.2: Research Methods in the Real World

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5.2.1: Chapter Introduction

Applying What You've Learned

The examples of sociological research provided throughout this text come from a variety of positions on the basic-public-applied continuum presented in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction". Some examples came from scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles, others from public-interest magazines, and others from applied settings. Nevertheless, students sometimes walk away from a research course wondering how any of what they've learned applies to their lives today and to their future plans. In this, the final chapter, we explore that question. We'll consider the variety of locations where research might crop up in your "real-world" life. For some, research might be a career. For others, perhaps research will provide a means to become engaged in social change efforts. For all of us, I hope that public sociology will present itself from time to time, perhaps in our reading, our web surfing, our television viewing, or our conversations with others. At the end of this chapter, we'll remind ourselves of some of the answers to the "why should I care" question that we addressed at the beginning of this text. I hope that by now you have your own ideas about how you might answer that question but I'll nevertheless remind you of the answers that we've already covered and provide a few others that perhaps hadn't occurred to you.

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5.2.2: Doing Research for a Living

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the areas outside of academia where sociologists are most commonly employed.
2. Define *evaluation research* and provide an example of it.
3. Describe the work of a market researcher.
4. Describe what sociologists working in policy and other government research do.

There are a variety of employers who hire social researchers. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, market research firms, corporations, public relations and communications firms, academic institutions, think tanks and other private research firms, public research firms and policy groups, and all levels of government. Some businesses hire social researchers to assist with personnel selection, many universities hire social researchers for their research institutes,For example, see University of Washington's Social Development Research Group (http://www.sdrg.org/), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Population Center (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/), Penn State's Survey Research Center (http://www.ssri.psu.edu/survey), University of Nebraska's Public Policy Center (http://ppc.unl.edu/), and University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center (http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/), to name just a few. and other firms such as Gallup (http://www.gallup.com/home.aspx) and Nielsen (http://www.nielsen.com/us/en.html) hire social researchers to examine societal trends. The areas where sociologists holding undergraduate degrees in research are most likely to find employment as researchers are in evaluation research, market research, and government research. Each of these represents a particular use of research rather than a research method per se. Evaluation, market, and government researchers may use any of the data collection or analysis strategies we described in Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" and Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis", but their purpose and aims may differ. We'll explore each of these different uses of social scientific research methods in the following.

Evaluation Research

As you may recall from the definition provided in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", evaluation research is research that is conducted to assess the effects of specific programs or policies. Evaluation research is often used when some form of social intervention is planned, such as welfare reform or school curriculum change. It might be used to assess the extent to which intervention is necessary by attempting to define and diagnose social problems, and it might also be used to understand whether applied interventions have had their intended consequences. Let's consider a couple of specific examples of evaluation research to better understand how and when it is employed.

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", I mentioned my experience conducting evaluation research with a transitional housing program. Among other services, workers at the transitional housing locations counseled residents on finding and maintaining employment. One purpose of the evaluation research therefore was to determine whether residents felt they were able to transition successfully back into their communities after a period of institutionalization by obtaining employment that could sustain a life outside of the transitional housing site. This **outcomes assessment** was conducted in order to determine whether the jobs counseling provided by the transitional housing employees produced the desired goal of preparing residents for finding and maintaining employment.

My first experience with evaluation research occurred during my senior year of college. That year, I conducted an internship at a hospital development office. My main task as an intern was to help the office assess how effective it had been in the preceding years in meeting its goal of raising local awareness of and support for the hospital. Using interview research methodology, I collected data from hospital employees and board members as well as members of the local community to learn about what people knew about the hospital, its development office, and the hospital's services and needs. This project culminated in written report and a final presentation to several members of the hospital board in which I and the development office director outlined several recommendations for future development office activities based on the feedback provided by the people I had interviewed.

Being able to apply what I'd learned in my research methods class to a real-world problem and solutions was an invaluable experience. Not only that, while gaining this experience I was able to contribute to the well-being of my community by helping a needed local resource (the hospital) find ways improve its relationship with the community. Perhaps you could look for similar opportunities in your community. Of course, this specific example isn't one of "doing research for a living," as suggested by this section's title, but it certainly gave me an experience worth noting on my resume and got me in the door of several potential employers for interviews when I began looking for jobs.

There are many other instances of applied evaluation research conducted by social scientists who are employed by firms for their skills as researchers. Just google the phrase *evaluation research firm* and you'll find scores of examples. Different firms may specialize in different areas of research. For example, Hoffman Clark & Associates, a California-based firm, specializes in public health and K–12 education assessment (http://www.hoffmanclark.org/index.php). Arizona firm LeCroy & Milligan Associates Inc. conducts evaluation research in the areas of criminal justice and health and human services (http://www.lecroymilligan.com/index.html). In Colorado, Outcomes Inc. focuses on children and families (http://www.outcomescolorado.com/home). Wilder Research, based in Minnesota, conducts evaluation research designed to help strengthen families and their communities (http://www.wilder.org/research.0.html). Massachusetts firm Social Science Research & Evaluation Inc. specializes in, among other areas, evaluation research on highway safety and transportation (http://www.ssre.org/index.html). Finally, Inventivo Design LLC in Colorado tailors its evaluation research services to corporations wishing to assess whether their investments "meet the goals of management and deliver on objectives" (http://www.inventivodesign.com). As you can see from this very limited sampling of evaluation research firms, employment as an evaluation researcher could take you to just about any area of the country and involve work with any number of industries and sectors.

Market Research

Market research is another way that you might engage in social scientific research to make a living. Just as with evaluation research, market research is not a particular research method per se. Instead, it is a particular way of utilizing research methodology for a particular purpose. **Market research** is research that is conducted for the purpose of guiding businesses and other organizations as they make decisions about how best to sell, improve, or promote a product or service. This sort of research might involve gathering data from and about one's core market and customers, about competitors, or about an industry more generally. Market research occurs in a variety of settings and institutions. Some firms specialize in market research specifically and are hired by others who wish to learn more about how to best promote or sell a product or service. Market research might also be conducted in-house, perhaps by large businesses that sell products or by nonprofits that wish to better understand how best to meet the needs of their clientele or promote their services.

Market researchers assess how best to sell, improve, or promote a product by gathering data about that product's consumers. Understanding consumers' preferences, tastes, attitudes, and behaviors can help point an organization in the right direction in its effort to reach and appeal to consumers. There are many ways to do this. You could observe customers in a store to watch which displays draw them in and which they ignore. You could administer a survey to assess consumers' satisfaction with a good or service. You could conduct covert observations by being a secret shopper or dining someplace as though you, the researcher, are a real customer. You could conduct focus groups with consumers. As you already know from reading this text, social scientific research is an excellent way to gauge people's preferences, tastes, attitudes, and behaviors. Each of these market research methods requires knowledge and skills in collecting data from human subjects—the very thing that sociological researchers do.

In the preceding section I identified just a small sampling of the many evaluation research firms that exist throughout the United States. There are also many firms that exist for the sole purpose of carrying out market research, all of which hire individuals who have a background in or knowledge about social scientific research methodology. Market research firms specialize in all kinds of areas. For example, Arbitron Inc. focuses on media, gathering data about radio audiences around the globe (http://www.arbitron.com/home/content.stm). From Maine, Market Decisions conducts market research on "a wide variety of topics from public policy to branding to feasibility" (http://www.marketdecisions.com/index.php). Nielsen, a company many are familiar with, conducts media research of all kinds (http://www.nielsen.com/us/en.html) but is perhaps best known for its ratings of television programming in the United States (http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/top10s/television.html). Specializing in the area of information technology, Gartner collects data to help its clients make IT-related decisions (http://www.gartner.com/technology/home.jsp). These are just a few of the many potential market research employers that seek individuals with research skills.

Policy and Other Government Research

Finally, many social science researchers do policy and other government-related kinds of work. In fact, the federal government is one of the largest employers of applied social science researchers. Government and policy research could be in any number of areas. For example, nonpartisan private firms such as Child Trends (http://www.childtrends.org/index.cfm) conduct research that is specifically intended to be useful for policymakers. In the case of Child Trends, researchers aim to improve the lives of children by "conducting high-quality research and sharing it with the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children"

(http://www.childtrends.org/_catdisp_page.cfm?LID=124). Other private firms, such as Belden Russonello & Stewart, conduct research aimed at helping create social change, including projects on biodiversity, education, and energy use.

As for government work, *Contexts* magazine recently published an article featuring four sociological researchers to whom President Obama's administration has turned, "relying on their unique understanding of American society to apply the most relevant research to policy-making" (2010, p. 14).Working for the G-man. (2010, Fall). *Contexts*, *9*, 14–15. Those researchers include James P. Lynch, Bureau of Justice Statistics Director; John Laub, Director of the National Institute of Justice; Robert M. Groves, US Census Bureau Director; and David Harris, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Services Policy in the US Department of Health and Human Services.

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Sociologists are employed in many arenas. Some of the most common include evaluation research, market research, and policy and other government research.

EXERCISE

If you're interested in hearing more from sociologists who do research, or sociology more generally, for a living, check out *Contexts*' article on "embedded sociologists" (Nyseth, Shannon, Heise, & McElrath, 2011)Nyseth, H., Shannon, S., Heise, K., & McElrath, S. M. (2011). Embedded sociologists. *Contexts*, *10*, 44–50. who work in fields as diverse as epidemiology to housing rights to human resources. The article can be found online at http://contexts.org/articles/spring-2011/embedded-sociologists/.

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5.2.3: Doing Research for a Cause

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define and provide at least one example of action research.
2. Define *stakeholders*.

Some sociologists engage in research for reasons in addition to or aside from career motivations. These individuals might conduct some form of action research. While action research may be conducted as part of a person's paid employment, as described in Section 3.2.2 "Doing Research for a Living", you might also conduct action research as a volunteer working for a cause that you find worthy. If you've discovered that you have an interest in sociological research but would rather not pursue a career in research, perhaps some volunteer involvement in action is for you.

Action research, sometimes referred to as participatory action research, is defined as research that is conducted for the purpose of creating some form of social change. When conducting action research, scholars collaborate with community **stakeholders** at all stages of the research process with the aim of producing results that will be usable in the community and by scientists. On the continuum of basic to applied research, action research is very far on the applied end of the spectrum. Sociologists who engage in this form of research never just go it alone; instead, they collaborate with the people who are affected by the research. Kristin Esterberg puts it quite eloquently when she says, "At heart, all action researchers are concerned that research not simply contribute to knowledge but also lead to positive changes in people's lives" (2002, p. 137).Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. Action research was first developed in the 1960s and 1970s (Freire, 1970)Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Herder and Herder. for the purpose of empowering individuals in underdeveloped nations (Reason, 1994).Reason, P. (1994). *Participation in human inquiry*. London, UK: Sage. Since then, action research has become increasingly popular among scholars who wish for their work to have tangible outcomes that benefit the groups that they study.

There are many excellent examples of action research. Some of these focus solely on arriving at useful outcomes for the communities upon which and with whom research is conducted. Other action research projects result in some new knowledge that has a practical application and purpose *in addition to* the creation of knowledge for basic scientific purposes. A search using the key term *action research* in Sociological Abstracts will yield a number of examples of the latter type.

One example of action research can be seen in Fred Piercy and colleagues' (Piercy, Franz, Donaldson, & Richard, 2011)Piercy, F. P., Franz, N., Donaldson, J. L., & Richard, R. F. (2011). Consistency and change in participatory action research: Reflections on a focus group study about how farmers learn. *The Qualitative Report, 16*, 820–829. work with farmers in Virginia, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Together with farmers in these states, the researchers conducted focus groups to understand how farmers learn new information about farming. Ultimately, the aim of this study was to "develop more meaningful ways to communicate information to farmers about sustainable agriculture." This improved communication, the researchers and farmers believed, would benefit not just researchers interested in the topic but also farmers and their communities. Farmers and researchers were both involved in all aspects of the research, from designing the project and determining focus group questions to conducting the focus groups and finally to analyzing data and disseminating findings.

Many additional examples of action research can be found at Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL; http://www.luc.edu/curl/index.shtml). At the center, researchers seek "to promote equality and to improve people's lives in communities throughout the Chicago metropolitan region." For example, in 2006 researchers at CURL embarked on a project to assess the impact on small, local retailers of new Walmart stores entering urban areas (Jones, 2008).Jones, S. M. (2008, May 13). Cities may mute effect of Wal-Mart. *Chicago Tribune*. The study found that, while the effect of Walmart on local retailers seems to have a larger impact in rural areas, Chicago-area local retailers did not experience as dramatic an impact. Nevertheless a "small but statistically significant relationship" was found between Walmart's arrival in the city and local retailers' closing their doors. This and other research conducted by CURL aims to raise awareness about and promote positive social change around issues affecting the lives of people in the Chicago area. CURL meets this aim by collaborating with members of the community to shape a research agenda, collect and analyze data, and disseminate results.

Perhaps one of the most unique and rewarding aspects of engaging in action research is that it is often interdisciplinary. Action research projects might bring together researchers from any number of disciplines, from the social sciences, such as sociology, political science, and psychology; to an assortment of physical and natural sciences, such as biology and chemistry; to engineering, philosophy, and history (to name just a few). One recent example of this kind of interdisciplinary action research can be seen in the

University of Maine's Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI) (http://www.umaine.edu/sustainabilitysolutions/index.htm). This initiative unites researchers from across campus together with local community members to "connect knowledge with action in ways that promote strong economies, vibrant communities, and healthy ecosystems in and beyond Maine." The knowledge-action connection is essential to SSI's mission, and the collaboration between community stakeholders and researchers is crucial to maintaining that connection. SSI is a relatively new effort; stay tuned to the SSI website to follow how this collaborative action research initiative develops.

Anyone interested in social change can benefit from having some understanding of social scientific research methods. The knowledge you've gained from your methods course can be put to good use even if you don't have an interest in pursuing a career in research. As a member of a community, perhaps you will find that the opportunity to engage in action research presents itself to you one day. And your background in research methodology will no doubt assist you and your collaborators in your effort to make life better for yourself and those who share your interests, circumstances, or geographic region.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Action research is conducted by researchers who wish to create some form of social change.
- Action research is often conducted by teams of interdisciplinary researchers.

EXERCISE

1. If you're interested in learning more about action research, or perhaps reading some specific examples of action research, check out the journal *Gateways*. It is a free, electronic, peer-reviewed scholarly journal focused on community-engaged research. Here's the link: http://www.luc.edu/curl/uts/index.html.

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5.2.4: Public Sociology

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Identify and describe at least two examples of public sociology.

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", we discussed public sociology and its place on the continuum of applied-basic research. One of the most delightful consequences of the trend toward public sociology is that the discipline has become more visible and more accessible to much broader audiences than perhaps ever before. But even with the increased accessibility of sociological research, you'll find that having a basic understanding of how sociologists conduct research, which you've gained from this text, is beneficial. In this section, we'll take a look at a few recent examples of public sociology and examine how your background in sociological research methods can help you read, make sense of, discuss, and even share the findings you come across.

In recent months, I've been interviewed by a journalist writing for a website run by Dr. Mehmet Oz of *The Dr. Oz Show* (http://www.youbeauty.com) and another writing for a website dedicated to any and every thing having to do with "video games and geek culture" (http://www.unwinnable.com). Inspired by the fall 2011 television programming lineup in the United States—in particular two new shows, including one featuring Playboy Bunnies and the other focused on the experiences of early PanAm flight attendants—the youbeauty.com interview focused on how expressions of gender, workplace norms, and harassment have changed in the past few decades.You can read the final article at http://www.youbeauty.com/relationships/the-secret-to-success-good-grooming. Interestingly, while the single quote attributed to me is accurate, the context within which I made the remark is not provided. One important caution for sociologists who choose to participate in press interviews is that your perspective may not always be represented in a way that you'd choose. In the other interview, conducted for an article on how heroism has changed since September 11, 2001 (Bannen, 2011),Bannen, B. (2011, July 19). Superheroes in a post-9/11 society. *Unwinnable*. Retrieved from http://www.unwinnable.com/2011/07/29/superheroes-in-a-post-911-society/ I was asked questions about patterns of social change. In both cases I was "doing" public sociology, drawing from my own background and knowledge about the sociological perspective on human behavior to help make sense of recent and current trends in society.

Many other sociologists engage in public sociology as well. Professor Pepper Schwartz, whose name you might recall from Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", is perhaps one of the most recognized public sociologists. In Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", I mentioned Schwartz's role as the relationship expert for the dating website PerfectMatch.com. Schwartz is also the sex and relationship expert for the American Association for Retired Persons, for whom she writes a regular column offering advice to those aged 50 and up. Her participation with these venues enables Schwartz to provide relevant sociological understanding, perspective, and knowledge to broad audiences.

Another example of public sociology can be seen in Professor Nikki Jones's work. Jones, an urban ethnographer who studies adolescent girls' violence, has found that the "mean girl" phenomenon represented in so much of our popular culture and so many news stories today is far more hype than reality (Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; Jones, 2009).Jones, N. (2009). *Between good and ghetto: African American girls and inner-city violence*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers; Chesney-Lind, M., & Jones, N. (Eds.). (2010). *Fighting for girls: New perspectives on gender and violence*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. In an effort to promote a better understanding of this and other matters of public interest upon which sociological and other scholarly evidence can and should be brought to bear, Jones collaborates with two other editors to maintain the website *The Public Intellectual* (http://thepublicintellectual.org). The site publishes work by academics and other researchers who write pieces intended to debunk "common knowledge" on matters of public concern, analyze social policies and problems, and examine cultural trends.

Finally, Professors Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp provide another excellent example of public sociology on their website *Sociological Images* (http://thesocietypages.org/socimages). The site provides sociological observations and commentary on images of all kinds, from advertisements to charts and graphs, and from around the globe. Their aim is to "encourage all kinds of people to exercise and develop their sociological imagination by presenting brief sociological discussions of compelling and timely imagery that spans the breadth of sociological inquiry." The images Wade and Sharp display on the site are chosen for their ability to illustrate sociological ideas in a way that is both compelling and accessible to sociological and nonsociological audiences alike. Peruse their site and as you'll see from the comments noted underneath each of the discussion/image posts that the *Sociological Images* audience runs the gamut in background, ideology, and perspective. In other words, the site accomplishes the exact aim of public sociology: to engage the public.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- One of the positive consequences of public sociology is that the discipline has become more visible and more accessible to much broader audiences than in the past.
- Having a background in sociological research methods can help you read, make sense of, discuss, and share the research findings you encounter.

EXERCISES

1. Check out at least one of the websites mentioned in the preceding section. What do you think of these examples of public sociology? Ask one of your nonsociologist friends to peruse the site. Discuss what you each found compelling. How does your knowledge of sociological research methods shape your understanding of what you've read?
2. Discuss public sociology with a few of your sociology peers. In what areas do you think public sociology can and should play a role?

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5.2.5: Revisiting an Earlier Question- Why Should We Care?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define *transferable skills*.
2. Identify several of the transferable skills you've gained from your understanding of sociological research methods.

I hope that by now I've managed to convince you that developing an understanding of how sociologists conduct research has many benefits. On the chance that I haven't done so, or in case you simply want a refresher, let's spend this final section of the final chapter reviewing some of the reasons you might care about research methods.

Transferable Skills

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", I suggested that one reason to care about research methods is that knowing how to conduct social science research could lead to a variety of job opportunities. The skills and knowledge you've gained from this text will situate you well for a number of research-oriented positions. Moreover, your background in social science research methodology provides you with a number of **transferable skills** that will serve you well in any profession you choose. Transferable skills are the conglomeration of tasks that a person develops proficiency in from one realm that can be applied in another realm. Whether you realize it or not, you have gained a host of transferable skills from taking a course in social scientific research methods. Those skills can assist you in your search for employment in a variety of arenas.

Perhaps the primary transferable skill you've developed by learning how to conduct social scientific research is an ability to solve problems. Not only that, you are now also better equipped to *identify* problems. What do social researchers do if not identify social problems and then seek to gain knowledge aimed at understanding and eradicating those problems? Having the ability to seek out problems and the requisite knowledge and tools to begin to solve those problems is crucial in many areas of employment. The investigative skills you've developed as a result of learning how to conduct social scientific research can be put to use in just about any job where taken-for-granted assumptions are called into question. These might include jobs such as journalism, but work in criminal justice requires investigative skills as does just about any position that requires one to solve problems, ask questions, and learn new ways of doing things.

Related to the problem-identification and problem-solving skills that you've developed by learning how to conduct social scientific research is another important ability: a talent for asking good questions. Not only is the ability to ask good questions essential in many areas of employment (and in most areas life as well), but also this skill is linked to another key area that comes up in research methods courses and is appreciated in many realms: **critical thinking**. Thinking critically does not mean that someone sits backs and criticizes every idea or person that comes her way. Critical thinking is a skill that takes practice to develop. It involves the careful evaluation of assumptions, actions, values, and other factors that influence a particular way of being or doing. It requires an ability to identify both weaknesses *and* strengths in taken-for-granted ways of doing things. A person who thinks critically should be able to demonstrate some level of understanding of the varying positions one might take on any given issue, even if he or she does not agree with those positions.

Understanding sociological research methods also means having some understanding of how to analyze, synthesize, and interpret information. And having a well-developed ability to carefully take in, think about, and understand the meaning of new information that you are confronted with will serve you well in all varieties of life circumstance and employment. In addition, the ability to communicate and clearly express oneself, both in writing and orally, is crucial in all professions. As you practice the tasks described throughout this text, you will attain and improve the oral and written communication skills that so many employers value. Finally, related to the ability to communicate effectively is the ability to effectively frame an argument or presentation. Successfully framing an argument requires not only good communication skills but also strength in the area of listening to others.

In sum, the transferable skills you've gained as a result of learning how to conduct social scientific research include the following:

1. Identifying problems
2. Identifying solutions to problems
3. Investigative skills and techniques
4. Asking good questions
5. Framing an argument
6. Listening

7. Critical thinking
8. Analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting information
9. Oral and written communication skills

Table 5.2.5.1:Transferable Skills Featured in This Text

Transferable skill	Chapters featuring skill (relevant focus within chapter)
Identifying problems	Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory" (inductive and deductive approaches)
	Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project" (starting where you are)
Identifying solutions to problems	Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory" (how theories and paradigms shape approach)
	Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" (research design)
	Chapter 5.1 "Reading and Understanding Social Research" (reading reports of research)
Investigative skills and techniques	Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" (searching for and reviewing the literature)
	Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory" (theories)
	Chapter 3.2 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis" (data collection)
	Chapter 5.1 "Reading and Understanding Social Research" (reading reports of research)
Asking good questions	Chapter 7.1 "Research Ethics" (ethics)
	Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project" (making questions empirical and sociological)
Framing an argument	Chapter 1.1 "Introduction" (ontology and epistemology)
	Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory" (theories)
	Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" (hypotheses)
Listening	Chapter 3.2 "Interviews: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches" (conducting interviews)
	Chapter 3.3 "Field Research: A Qualitative Technique" (getting into and establishing rapport in field)
	Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis" (focus groups, ethnomethodology)
	Chapter 5.1 "Reading and Understanding Social Research" (being responsible consumers of research)
Critical thinking	Chapter 1.2 "Introduction" (sources of knowledge)
	Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory" (theories)
	Chapter 7.1 "Research Ethics" (ethics)
	Chapter 5.1 "Reading and Understanding Social Research" (understanding social research)
Analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting information	Chapter 2.1 "Research Design" (reviewing the literature)
	Chapter 3.1 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 3.5 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis" (data analysis)
	Chapter 5.1 "Reading and Understanding Social Research" (reading and understanding social research)
Oral and written communication	Chapter 6.1 "Sharing Your Work" (sharing your work)

Transferable skill	Chapters featuring skill (relevant focus within chapter)
skills	Chapter 1.2 "Introduction" through Chapter 7.1 "Research Methods in the Real World" (written and oral exercises throughout)

Understanding Yourself, Your Circumstances, and Your World

Perhaps the most rewarding consequence of understanding social scientific research methods is the ability to gain a better understanding of yourself, your circumstances, and your world. Through the application of social scientific research methods, sociologists have asked—and answered—many of the world's most pressing questions. Certainly those answers are not always complete, nor are they infallible, but the quest for knowledge and understanding is an ongoing process. As social scientists continue the process of asking questions and seeking answers, perhaps you will choose to participate in that quest now that you have gained some knowledge and skill in how to conduct research.

Having thought about what you know and how you know it, as well as what others claim to know and how *they* know it, I hope will provide you with some clarity in an often-murky world. Whether you choose to adopt the particular ways of knowing described in this text as your preferred ways of knowing is totally up to you. I hope that you will find that the knowledge you've gained here is of use, perhaps in terms of your personal life and interests, in your relationships with others, or in your longer-range school or career goals.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Having a background in social science research methodology provides you with a number of transferable skills.
- Having a background in social science research methodology gives you the opportunity to gain greater insight into yourself, your circumstances, and your world.

EXERCISES

1. If you're interested in gaining some more research experience, check out the National Science Foundation's Research for Undergraduates (REU) program. The program provides opportunities for students to conduct research at a host institution along with a small group of undergraduate peers. To learn more about the program and search for current locations hosting REU programs, see the following: http://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/reu/.
2. Review Table 5.2.5.1 "Transferable Skills Featured in This Text". Are there transferable skills listed there that you're not yet convinced you've attained? If so, take another look at the cited chapter(s). Are there transferable skills you feel you've gained that are not listed in the table? If so, what are they and in which chapter(s) are they featured?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Integrate research into a report with a project description, methodology, analysis, conclusions, and future areas of research

6.1: Sharing Your Work

6.1.1: Deciding What to Share and With Whom to Share It

6.1.2: Presenting Your Research

6.1.3: Writing Up Research Results

6.1.4: Disseminating Findings

6: Integrate research into a report with a project description, methodology, analysis, conclusions, and future areas of research is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

6.1: Sharing Your Work

Research as Public Activity

In Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", you were introduced to the recent trend toward public sociology. As you might recall, public sociology refers to the application of sociological theories and research to matters of public interest. You might also recall that sociologists differ in their feelings about whether and the extent to which sociologists should aspire to conduct public sociology. Whether they support the movement toward public sociology or not, most sociologists who conduct research hope that their work will have relevance to others besides themselves. As such, research is in some ways a public activity. While the work may be conducted by an individual in a private setting, the knowledge gained from that work should be shared with one's peers and other parties who may have an interest. Understanding how to share one's work is an important aspect of the research process.

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6.1.1: Deciding What to Share and With Whom to Share It

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the six questions social researchers should be able to answer to ensure that their ethical obligations have been met.
2. Describe how differences in one's audience might shape how a person shares research findings.

When preparing to share our work with others we must decide what to share, with whom to share it, and in what format(s) to share it. In this section, we'll consider the former two aspects of sharing our work. In the sections that follow, we'll consider the various formats and mechanisms through which social scientists might share their work.

Sharing It All: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Because conducting sociological research is a scholarly pursuit and because sociological researchers generally aim to reach a true understanding of social processes, it is crucial that we share all aspects of our research—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Doing so helps ensure that others will understand, be able to build from, and effectively critique our work. We considered this aspect of the research process in Chapter 7.1 "Research Ethics", but it is worth reviewing here.

In Chapter 7.1 "Research Ethics", we learned about the importance of sharing all aspects of our work for ethical reasons and for the purpose of replication. In preparing to share your work with others, and in order to meet your ethical obligations as a sociological researcher, challenge yourself to answer the following questions:

1. Why did I conduct this research?
2. How did I conduct this research?
3. For whom did I conduct this research?
4. What conclusions can I reasonably draw from this research?
5. Knowing what I know now, what would I do differently?
6. How could this research be improved?

Understanding *why* you conducted your research will help you be honest—with yourself and your readers—about your own personal interest, investments, or biases with respect to the work. In Chapter 1.3 "Beginning a Research Project", I suggested that starting where you are is a good way to begin a research project. While this is true, using the idea of starting where you are *effectively* requires that you be honest with yourself and your readers about where you are and why you have chosen to conduct research in a particular area. Being able to clearly communicate *how* you conducted your research is also important. This means being honest about your data collection methods, sample and sampling strategy, and analytic strategy.

The third question in the list is designed to help you articulate who the major stakeholders are in your research. Of course, the researcher is a stakeholder. Additional stakeholders might include funders, research participants, or others who share something in common with your research subjects (e.g., members of some community where you conducted research or members of the same social group, such as parents or athletes, upon whom you conducted your research). Professors for whom you conducted research as part of a class project might be stakeholders, as might employers for whom you conducted research. We'll revisit the concept of stakeholders in Chapter 5.1 "Research Methods in the Real World".

The fourth question should help you think about the major strengths of your work. Finally, the last two questions are designed to make you think about potential weaknesses in your work and how future research might build from or improve upon your work.

Knowing Your Audience

Once you are able to articulate *what* to share, you must decide with whom to share it. Certainly the most obvious candidates with whom you'll share your work are other social scientists. If you are conducting research for a class project, your main "audience" will probably be your professor. Perhaps you'll also share your work with other students in the class. Other potential audiences include stakeholders, reporters and other media representatives, policymakers, and members of the public more generally.

While you would never alter your actual *findings* for different audiences, understanding who your audience is will help you frame your research in a way that is most meaningful to that audience. For example, I have shared findings from my study of older worker harassment with a variety of audiences, including students in my classes, colleagues in my own discipline (Blackstone, 2010)Blackstone, A. (2010, August). *"The young girls thought I should be home waiting to die!" Harassment of older workers*. Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, GA. and outside of it (Blackstone,

forthcoming),Blackstone, A. (forthcoming). Harassment of older adults in the workplace. In P. Brownell & J. Kelly (Eds.), *Ageism in the workplace*. London, UK: Springer-Verlag. news reporters (Leary, 2010),Leary, M. (2010, August). Interview by *Maine Public Broadcasting Network*, Maine State Capitol News Service. the organization that funded my research (Blackstone, 2008),Blackstone, A. (2008). *Workplace harassment: Conceptualizations of older workers*, National Science Foundation Grant SES-0817673. older workers themselves, and government (2010)Blackstone, A. (2010, June). *Workplace harassment: Conceptualizations and experiences of older workers in Maine*. Presentation to the Maine Jobs Council, Augusta, ME. and other agencies that deal with workplace policy and worker advocacy. I shared with all these audiences what I view as the study's three major findings: that devaluing older workers' contributions by ignoring them or excluding them from important decisions is the most common harassment experience for people in my sample, that there were few differences between women's and men's experiences and their perceptions of workplace harassment, and that the most common way older workers respond when harassed is to keep it to themselves and tell no one. But how I presented these findings and the level of detail I shared about how I reached these findings varied by audience.

I shared the most detail about my research methodology, including data collection method, sampling, and analytic strategy, with colleagues and with my funding agency. In addition, the funding agency requested and received information about the exact timeline during which I collected data and any minor bureaucratic hiccups I encountered during the course of collecting data. These hiccups had no bearing on the data actually collected or relevance to my findings, but they were nevertheless details to which I felt my funder should be privy. I shared similar information with my student audience though I attempted to use less technical jargon with students than I used with colleagues.

Now that you've considered what to share and with whom to share it, let's consider *how* social scientists share their research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As they prepare to share their research, researchers must keep in mind their ethical obligations to their peers, their research participants, and the public.
- Audience peculiarities will shape how much and in what ways details about one's research are reported.

EXERCISE

1. Read a scholarly article of your choice. What evidence can you find that might indicate that the author gave some thought to the six questions outlined in this section?

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6.1.2: Presenting Your Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the major principles of formal presentations of research.
2. Describe roundtable presentations and their benefits.
3. Discuss the purpose of and formatting principles for poster presentations.

Presenting your research is an excellent way to get feedback on your work. Professional sociologists often make presentations to their peers to prepare for more formally writing up and eventually publishing their work. Presentations might be formal talks, either as part of a panel at a professional conference or to some other group of peers or other interested parties; less formal roundtable discussions, another common professional conference format; or posters that are displayed in some specially designated area. We'll look at all three presentation formats here.

When preparing a formal talk, it is very important to get details well in advance about how long your presentation is expected to last and whether any visual aids such as video or PowerPoint slides are expected by your audience. At conferences, the typical formal talk is usually expected to last between 15 and 20 minutes. While this may sound like a torturously lengthy amount of time, you'll be amazed the first time you present formally by how easily time can fly. Once a researcher gets into the groove of talking about something as near and dear to him as his very own research, it is common for him to become so engrossed in it and enamored of the sound of his own voice that he forgets to watch the clock and finds himself being dragged offstage after giving only an introduction of his research method! To avoid this all-too-common occurrence, it is crucial that you repeatedly practice your presentation in advance—and time yourself.

One stumbling block in formal presentations of research work is setting up the study or problem the research addresses. Keep in mind that with limited time, audience members will be more interested to hear about your original work than to hear you cite a long list of previous studies to introduce your own research. While in scholarly written reports of your work you *must* discuss the studies that have come before yours, in a presentation of your work the key is to use what precious time you have to highlight *your* work. Whatever you do in your formal presentation, *do not read your paper verbatim*. Nothing will bore an audience more quickly than that. Highlight only the key points of your study. These generally include your research question, your methodological approach, your major findings, and a few final takeaways.

In less formal **roundtable presentations** of your work, the aim is usually to help stimulate a *conversation* about a topic. The time you are given to present may be slightly shorter than in a formal presentation, and you'll also be expected to participate in the conversation that follows all presenters' talks. Roundtables can be especially useful when your research is in the earlier stages of development. Perhaps you've conducted a pilot study and you'd like to talk through some of your findings and get some ideas about where to take the study next. A roundtable is an excellent place to get some suggestions and also get a preview of the objections reviewers may raise with respect to your conclusions or your approach to the work. Roundtables are also great places to network and meet other scholars who share a common interest with you.

Finally, in a **poster presentation** you visually represent your work. Just as you wouldn't read a paper verbatim in a formal presentation, avoid at all costs printing and pasting your paper onto a poster board. Instead, think about how to tell the "story" of your work in graphs, charts, tables, and other images. Bulleted points are also fine, as long as the poster isn't so wordy that it would be difficult for someone walking by very slowly to grasp your major argument and findings. Posters, like roundtables, can be quite helpful at the early stages of a research project because they are designed to encourage the audience to engage you in conversation about your research. Don't feel that you must share every detail of your work in a poster; the point is to share highlights and then converse with your audience to get their feedback, hear their questions, and provide additional details about your research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In formal presentations, include your research question, methodological approach, major findings, and a few final takeaways.
- Roundtable presentations emphasize discussion among participants.
- Poster presentations are visual representations of research findings.

EXERCISES

1. Imagine how you might present some of your work in poster format. What would the poster look like? What would it contain? Many helpful web resources offer advice on how to create a scholarly poster presentation. Simply google "scholarly poster presentation" and you'll find hundreds of sites that share tips on creating an effective poster. Visit a few of the links that your Google search yielded. How has your vision for your poster changed and why?
2. One way to prepare yourself for presenting your work in any format is to get comfortable talking casually with others about your research. Practice with your friends and family. Engage them in a conversation about your research. Or if you haven't conducted research yet, talk about your research interests. Ask them to repeat what they heard you express about your research project or interest. How closely do their reports match what you intended to express?

6.1.2: Presenting Your Research is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

6.1.3: Writing Up Research Results

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the differences between reports for scholarly consumption and reports for public consumption.
2. Define plagiarism and explain why it should be taken seriously.

I once had a student who conducted research on how children interact with each other in public. She was inspired to conduct her work after reading Barrie Thorne's (1993)Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. research on how children regulate gender through their interactions with one another. This student conducted field observations of children on playgrounds for an assignment in my research methods class. The assignment included writing up a scholarly report of findings. After writing up her scholarly report, the student revised it and submitted it for publication in the student column of *Contexts*, the American Sociological Association's public-interest magazine (Yearwood, 2009).Yearwood, E. (2009). Children and gender. *Contexts*, *8*. Because *Contexts* readers run the gamut from academic sociologists to nonacademics and nonsociologists who simply have an interest in the magazine's content, articles in the magazine are presented in a different format from the format used in other sociology journals. Thus my student had the opportunity to write up her findings in two different ways—first for scholarly consumption and then for public consumption. As she learned, and as we'll discuss in this section, reports for fellow scholars typically differ from reports for a more general public audience.

Reports of findings that will be read by other scholars generally follow the format outlined in the discussion of reviewing the literature in Chapter 2.1 "Research Design". As you may recall from that chapter, most scholarly reports of research include an abstract, an introduction, a literature review, a discussion of research methodology, a presentation of findings, and some concluding remarks and discussion about implications of the work. Reports written for scholarly consumption also contain a list of references, and many include tables or charts that visually represent some component of the findings. Reading prior literature in your area of interest is an excellent way to develop an understanding of the core components of scholarly research reports and to begin to learn how to write those components yourself. There also are many excellent resources to help guide students as they prepare to write scholarly reports of research (Johnson, Rettig, Scott, & Garrison, 2009; Sociology Writing Group, 2007; Becker, 2007; American Sociological Association, 2010).Johnson, W. A., Rettig, R. P., Scott, G. M., & Garrison, S. M. (2009). *The sociology student writer's manual* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; Sociology Writing Group. (2007). *A guide to writing sociology papers*. New York, NY: Worth; Becker, H. S. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; American Sociological Association. (2010). *ASA style guide* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author. A very brief version of the ASA style guide can be found at http://www.asanet.org/students/ASA%20Quick%20Style%20Guide%204th%20edition%20update.pdf.

Reports written for public consumption differ from those written for scholarly consumption. As noted elsewhere in this chapter, knowing your audience is crucial when preparing a report of your research. What are they likely to want to hear about? What portions of the research do you feel are crucial to share, regardless of the audience? Answering these questions will help you determine how to shape any written reports you plan to produce. In fact, some outlets answer these questions for you, as in the case of newspaper editorials where rules of style, presentation, and length will dictate the shape of your written report.

Whoever your audience, don't forget what it is that you are reporting: social scientific evidence. Take seriously your role as a social scientist and your place among peers in your discipline. Present your findings as clearly and as honestly as you possibly can; pay appropriate homage to the scholars who have come before you, even while you raise questions about their work; and aim to engage your readers in a discussion about your work and about avenues for further inquiry. Even if you won't ever meet your readers face-to-face, imagine what they might ask you upon reading your report, imagine your response, and provide some of those details in your written report.

Finally, take extraordinary care *not* to commit **plagiarism**. Presenting someone else's words or ideas as if they are your own is among the most egregious transgressions a scholar can commit. Indeed, plagiarism has ended many careers (Maffly, 2011)As just a single example, take note of this story: Maffly, B. (2011, August 19). "Pattern of plagiarism" costs University of Utah scholar his job. *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Retrieved from http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/cougars/52378377-78/bakhtiari-university-panel-plagiarism.html.csp?page=1 and many students' opportunities to pursue degrees (Go, 2008).As a single example (of many) of the consequences for students of committing plagiarism, see Go, A. (2008). Two students kicked off semester at sea for plagiarism. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/paper-trail/2008/08/14/two-students-kicked-off-semester-at-sea-for-plagiarism Take this very, very seriously. If you feel a little afraid and paranoid after

reading this warning, consider it a good thing—and let it motivate you to take extra care to ensure that you are *not* plagiarizing the work of others.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Reports for public consumption usually contain fewer details than reports for scholarly consumption.
- Keep your role and obligations as a social scientist in mind as you write up research reports.
- Plagiarism is among the most egregious transgressions a scholar can commit.

EXERCISES

1. Imagine that you've been tasked with sharing the results of some of your research with your parents. What details would you be sure to include? What details might you leave out, and why?
2. Have a discussion with a few of your peers about plagiarism. How do you each define the term? What strategies do you employ to ensure that you avoid committing plagiarism?

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6.1.4: Disseminating Findings

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define dissemination.
- Discuss the three considerations to keep in mind in order to successfully disseminate your findings.

Presenting your work, discussed in Section 6.1.2 "Presenting Your Research", is one way of disseminating your research findings. In this section, we'll focus on disseminating the *written* results of your research. **Dissemination** refers to "a planned process that involves consideration of target audiences and the settings in which research findings are to be received and, where appropriate, communicating and interacting with wider policy and…service audiences in ways that will facilitate research uptake in decision-making processes and practice" (Wilson, Petticrew, Calnan, & Natareth, 2010, p. 91).Wilson, P. M., Petticrew, M., Calnan, M. W., & Natareth, I. (2010). Disseminating research findings: What should researchers do? A systematic scoping review of conceptual frameworks. *Implementation Science*, *5*, 91. In other words, dissemination of research findings involves careful planning, thought, consideration of target audiences, and communication with those audiences. Writing up results from your research and having others take notice are two entirely different propositions. In fact, the general rule of thumb is that people will *not* take notice unless you help and encourage them to do so. To paraphrase the classic line from the film *Field of Dreams*, just because you build it doesn't mean they will come.

Disseminating your findings successfully requires determining *who* your audience is, *where* your audience is, and *how* to reach them. When considering who your audience is, think about who is likely to take interest in your work. Your audience might include those who do not express enthusiastic interest but might nevertheless benefit from an awareness of your research. Your research participants and those who share some characteristics in common with your participants are likely to have some interest in what you've discovered in the course of your research. Other scholars who study similar topics are another obvious audience for your work. Perhaps there are policymakers who should take note of your work. Organizations that do work in an area related to the topic of your research are another possibility. Finally, any and all inquisitive and engaged members of the public represent a possible audience for your work.

Where your audience is should be fairly obvious once you've determined who you'd like your audience to be. You know where your research participants are because you've studied them. You can find interested scholars on your campus (e.g., perhaps you could offer to present your findings at some campus event), at professional conferences, and via publications such as professional organizations' newsletters (an often-overlooked source for sharing findings in brief form) and scholarly journals. Policymakers include your state and federal representatives who, at least in theory, should be available to hear a constituent speak on matters of policy interest. Perhaps you're already aware of organizations that do work in an area related to your research topic, but if not, a simple web search should help you identify possible organizational audiences for your work. Disseminating your findings to the public more generally could take any number of forms: a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, a blog, or even a post or two on your Facebook wall.

Finally, determining how to reach your audiences will vary according to which audience you wish to reach. Your strategy should be determined by the norms of the audience. For example, scholarly journals provide author submission instructions that clearly define requirements for anyone wishing to disseminate their work via a particular journal. The same is true for newspaper editorials; check your newspaper's website for details about how to format and submit letters to the editor. If you wish to reach out to your political representatives, a call to their offices or, again, a simple web search should tell you how to do that.

Whether you act on all these suggestions is ultimately your decision. But if you've conducted high-quality research and you have findings that are likely to be of interest to any constituents besides yourself, I would argue that it is your duty as a scholar and a sociologist to share those findings. In sum, disseminating findings involves the following three steps:

1. Determine *who* your audience is.
2. Identify *where* your audience is.
3. Discover *how* best to reach them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Disseminating findings takes planning and careful consideration of one's audiences.
- The dissemination process includes determining the who, where, and how of reaching one's audiences.

EXERCISES

1. What additional potential audiences for your research, aside from those already mentioned, can you identify? How might you reach those audiences?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the assertion that researchers who conduct high-quality research have a duty to share their findings with others? Explain.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Identify ethical issues in research

7.1: Research Ethics
7.1.1: Research on Humans
7.1.2: Specific Ethical Issues to Consider
7.1.3: Ethics at Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels
7.1.4: The Practice of Science Versus the Uses of Science

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7.1: Research Ethics

Ethics in Sociological Research

Can pursuing a career in sociology land you in jail? As inconceivable as that may sound, ask sociology graduate student Scott DeMuth, and he'll likely tell you that indeed it can. Mr. DeMuth's recent jailing sparked debate across the blogosphere about the ethical rights and obligations of social researchers and about the moral and public purpose of sociological research. We'll discuss DeMuth's research later in this chapter. But first, let's consider the primary factor that shapes the ethics of sociological research: the fact that we conduct research on living human beings.

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7.1.1: Research on Humans

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define the term *human subjects*.
2. Describe and provide examples of nonhuman subjects that sociologists might examine.
3. Provide a brief outline of the history of research on human subjects.
4. Define institutional review boards and describe their purpose.

In 1998, actor Jim Carey starred in the movie *The Truman Show*.You can read a brief synopsis of the film at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120382. At first glance, the film appears to depict a perfect sociological experiment. Just imagine the possibilities if we could control every aspect of a person's life, from how and where that person lives to where he or she works to whom he or she marries. Of course, keeping someone in a bubble, controlling every aspect of his or her life, and sitting back and watching would be highly unethical (not to mention illegal). However, the movie clearly inspires thoughts about the differences between sociological research and research on nonhumans. One of the most exciting—and most challenging—aspects of conducting sociological research is the fact that (at least much of the time) our subjects are living human beings whose free will and human rights will always have an impact on what we are able to research and how we are able to conduct that research.

Human Research Versus Nonhuman Research

While all research comes with its own set of ethical concerns, those associated with research conducted on **human subjects** vary dramatically from those of research conducted on nonliving entities. The US Department of Health and Human Services defines a human subject as "a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information" (1993).US Department of Health and Human Services. (1993). Institutional review board guidebook glossary. Retrieved from http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/archive/irb/irb_glossary.htm

In some states, human subjects also include deceased individuals and human fetal materials. Nonhuman research subjects, on the other hand, are objects or entities that investigators manipulate or analyze in the process of conducting research. In sociology, nonhuman research subjects typically include sources such as newspapers, historical documents, advertisements, television shows, buildings, and even garbage (to name just a few) that are analyzed for unobtrusive research projects.

Unsurprisingly, research on human subjects is regulated much more heavily than research on nonhuman subjects. However, there are ethical considerations that all researchers must consider regardless of their research subject. We'll discuss those considerations in addition to concerns that are unique to research on human subjects.

A Historical Look at Research on Humans

Research on humans hasn't always been regulated in the way that it is today. The earliest documented cases of research using human subjects are of medical vaccination trials (Rothman, 1987).Rothman, D. J. (1987). Ethics and human experimentation. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 317*, 1195–1199. One such case took place in the late 1700s, when scientist Edward Jenner exposed an 8-year-old boy to smallpox in order to identify a vaccine for the devastating disease. Medical research on human subjects continued without much law or policy intervention until the mid-1900s when, at the end of World War II, a number of Nazi doctors and scientists were put on trial for conducting human experimentation during the course of which they tortured and murdered many concentration camp inmates (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986).One little-known fact, as described by Faden and Beauchamp in their 1986 book, is that at the very time that the Nazis conducted their horrendous experiments, Germany did actually have written regulations specifying that human subjects must clearly and willingly consent to their participation in medical research. Obviously these regulations were completely disregarded by the Nazi experimenters, but the fact that they existed suggests that efforts to regulate the ethical conduct of research, while necessary, are certainly not sufficient for ensuring that human subjects' rights will be honored. Faden, R. R., & Beauchamp, T. L. (1986). *A history and theory of informed consent*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. The trials, conducted in Nuremberg, Germany, resulted in the creation of the **Nuremberg Code**, a 10-point set of research principles designed to guide doctors and scientists who conduct research on human subjects. Today, the Nuremberg Code guides medical and other research conducted on human subjects, including social scientific research.

Medical scientists are not the only researchers who have conducted questionable research on humans. In the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram (1974)Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. New York, NY: Harper &

Row. conducted a series of experiments designed to understand obedience to authority in which he tricked subjects into believing they were administering an electric shock to other subjects. In fact, the shocks weren't real at all, but some, though not many, of Milgram's research participants experienced extreme emotional distress after the experiment (Ogden, 2008).Ogden, R. (2008). Harm. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 379–380). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. A reaction of emotional distress is understandable. The realization that one is willing to administer painful shocks to another human being just because someone who looks authoritative has told you to do so might indeed be traumatizing—even if you later learn that the shocks weren't real.

Around the same time that Milgram conducted his experiments, sociology graduate student Laud Humphreys (1970)Humphreys, L. (1970). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. London, UK: Duckworth. was collecting data for his dissertation research on the tearoom trade, the practice of men engaging in anonymous sexual encounters in public restrooms. Humphreys wished to understand who these men were and why they participated in the trade. To conduct his research, Humphreys offered to serve as a "watch queen," the person who keeps an eye out for police and gets the benefit of being able to watch the sexual encounters, in a local park restroom where the tearoom trade was known to occur. What Humphreys did *not* do was identify himself as a researcher to his research subjects. Instead, he watched his subjects for several months, getting to know several of them, learning more about the tearoom trade practice and, without the knowledge of his research subjects, jotting down their license plate numbers as they pulled into or out of the parking lot near the restroom. Some time after participating as a watch queen, with the help of several insiders who had access to motor vehicle registration information, Humphreys used those license plate numbers to obtain the names and home addresses of his research subjects. Then, disguised as a public health researcher, Humphreys visited his subjects in their homes and interviewed them about their lives and their health. Humphreys's research dispelled a good number of myths and stereotypes about the tearoom trade and its participants. He learned, for example, that over half of his subjects were married to women and many of them did not identify as gay or bisexual.Humphreys's research is still relevant today. In fact, as the 2007 arrest of Idaho Senator Larry Craig in a public restroom at the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport attests, undercover police operations targeting tearoom activities still occur, more than 40 years after Humphreys conducted his research. Humphreys's research is also frequently cited by attorneys who represent clients arrested for lewd behavior in public restrooms.

Once Humphreys's work became public, the result was some major controversy at his home university (e.g., the chancellor tried to have his degree revoked), among sociologists in general, and among members of the public, as it raised public concerns about the purpose and conduct of sociological research. In addition, the *Washington Post* journalist Nicholas von Hoffman wrote the following warning about "sociological snoopers":

We're so preoccupied with defending our privacy against insurance investigators, dope sleuths, counterespionage men, divorce detectives and credit checkers, that we overlook the social scientists behind the hunting blinds who're also peeping into what we thought were our most private and secret lives. But they are there, studying us, taking notes, getting to know us, as indifferent as everybody else to the feeling that to be a complete human involves having an aspect of ourselves that's unknown. (von Hoffman, 2008)Von Hoffman, N. (1970, January 30). Sociological snoopers. *The Washington Post*, p. B1.

In the original version of his report, Humphreys defended the ethics of his actions. In 2008, years after Humphreys's death, his book was reprinted with the addition of a retrospect on the ethical implications of his work.Humphreys, L. (2008). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places, enlarged edition with a retrospect on ethical issues*. New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction. In his written reflections on his research and the fallout from it, Humphreys maintained that his tearoom observations constituted ethical research on the grounds that those interactions occurred in public places. But Humphreys added that he would conduct the second part of his research differently. Rather than trace license numbers and interview unwitting tearoom participants in their homes under the guise of public health research, Humphreys instead would spend more time in the field and work to cultivate a pool of informants. Those informants would know that he was a researcher and would be able to fully consent to being interviewed. In the end, Humphreys concluded that "there is no reason to believe that any research subjects have suffered because of my efforts, or that the resultant demystification of impersonal sex has harmed society" (p. 231).Humphreys, L. (2008). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places, enlarged edition with a retrospect on ethical issues*. New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction.

As should be evident by now, there is no clear or easy answer to the question of whether Humphreys conducted ethical research. Today, given increasing regulation of social scientific research, chances are slim that a sociologist would be allowed to conduct a project similar to Humphreys's. Some argue that Humphreys's research was deceptive, put his subjects at risk of losing their families and their positions in society, and was therefore unethical (Warwick, 1973; Warwick, 1982).Warwick, D. P. (1973). Tearoom trade: Means and ends in social research. *Hastings Center Studies*, *1*, 39–49. See also Warwick, D. P. (1982). Types of harm in social research. In T. L. Beauchamp, R. R. Faden, R. J. Wallace Jr., & L. Walters (Eds.), *Ethical issues in social science*

research. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Others suggest that Humphreys's research "did not violate any premise of either beneficence or the sociological interest in social justice" and that the benefits of Humphreys's research, namely the dissolution of myths about the tearoom trade specifically and human sexual practice more generally, outweigh the potential risks associated with the work (Lenza, 2004).Lenza, M. (2004). Controversies surrounding Laud Humphreys' tearoom trade: An unsettling example of politics and power in methodological critiques. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 24*, 20–31. See also Nardi, P. M. (1995). "The breastplate of righteousness": Twenty-five years after Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. *Journal of Homosexuality, 30*, 1–10. What do *you* think, and why?

These and other studies (Reverby, 2009)One such study is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, conducted in Alabama from the 1930s to the 1970s. The goal of the study was to understand the natural progression of syphilis in human beings. Investigators working for the Public Health Service enrolled hundreds of poor African American men in the study, some of whom had been diagnosed with syphilis and others who had not. Even after effective syphilis treatment was identified in the 1940s, research participants were denied treatment so that researchers could continue to observe the progression of the disease. The study came to an end in 1972 after knowledge of the experiment became public. In 1997, President Clinton publicly apologized on behalf of the American people for the study (http://clinton4.nara.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html). For more on the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, see Reverby, S. M. (2009). *Examining Tuskegee: The infamous syphilis study and its legacy*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. led to increasing public awareness of and concern about research on human subjects. In 1974, the US Congress enacted the National Research Act, which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The commission produced *The Belmont Report*, a document outlining basic ethical principles for research on human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research. Retrieved from http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html The National Research Act also required that all institutions receiving federal support establish **institutional review boards (IRBs)** to protect the rights of human research subjects (1974).National Research Act of 1974, Pub. L. no. 93-348 Stat 88. (1974). The act can be read at http://history.nih.gov/research/downloads/PL93-348.pdf. Since that time, many organizations that do *not* receive federal support but where research is conducted have also established review boards to evaluate the ethics of the research that they conduct.

Institutional Review Boards

IRBs are tasked with ensuring that the rights and welfare of human research subjects will be protected at all institutions, including universities, hospitals, nonprofit research institutions, and other organizations, that receive federal support for research. IRBs typically consist of members from a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, economics, education, social work, and communications (to name a few). Most IRBs also include representatives from the community in which they reside. For example, representatives from nearby prisons, hospitals, or treatment centers might sit on the IRBs of university campuses near them. The diversity of membership helps to ensure that the many and complex ethical issues that may arise from human subjects research will be considered fully and by a knowledgeable and experienced panel. Investigators conducting research on human subjects are required to submit proposals outlining their research plans to IRBs for review and approval prior to beginning their research. Even students who conduct research on human subjects must have their proposed work reviewed and approved by the IRB before beginning any research (though, on some campuses, some exceptions are made for classroom projects that will not be shared outside of the classroom).

It may surprise you to hear that IRBs are not always popular or appreciated by researchers. Who *wouldn't* want to conduct ethical research, you ask? In some cases, the concern is that IRBs are most well versed in reviewing biomedical and experimental research, neither of which is particularly common within sociology. Much sociological research, especially qualitative research, is open ended in nature, a fact that can be problematic for IRBs. The members of IRBs often want to know in advance exactly who will be observed, where, when, and for how long, whether and how they will be approached, exactly what questions they will be asked, and what predictions the researcher has for her or his findings. Providing this level of detail for a yearlong participant observation within an activist group of 200-plus members, for example, would be extraordinarily frustrating for the researcher in the best case and most likely would prove to be impossible. Of course, IRBs do not intend to have researchers avoid studying controversial topics or avoid using certain methodologically sound data-collection techniques, but unfortunately, that is sometimes the result. The solution is not to do away with review boards, which serve a necessary and important function, but instead to help educate IRB members about the variety of social scientific research methods and topics covered by sociologists and other social scientists.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The fact that many of our research subjects in sociology are human presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities when it comes to conducting ethical research.
- Research on human subjects has not always been regulated to the extent that it is today.
- All institutions receiving federal support for research must have an IRB. Organizations that do not receive federal support but where research is conducted also often include IRBs as part of their organizational structure.

EXERCISES

1. Read the 10 principles of the Nuremberg Code at the National Institutes of Health website: http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/nuremberg.html. Consider how these principles apply to sociological research.
2. Check out the IRB on your campus. Most IRBs have websites that contain useful information about the review process, membership, specific campus rules and regulations, and training. How does the IRB on your campus operate? Who are its members?
3. Watch the 2004 film *Kinsey*. How might your campus's IRB respond to Alfred Kinsey's research were he to submit a proposal for his work today? Why?
4. Read about Professor Jin Li's 2011 lawsuit against Brown University, whose IRB barred Li from using data she had collected in a study of Chinese American children's learning beliefs and socialization: http://www.browndailyherald.com/professor-sues-u-over-research-protocol-1.2518118#.Tyx7sCOQ1Lc. What is your opinion of this case? Should Li be allowed to use her data? Why or why not?

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7.1.2: Specific Ethical Issues to Consider

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define informed consent, and describe how it works.
- Identify the unique concerns related to the study of vulnerable populations.
- Understand the definitions of and the differences between anonymity and confidentiality.
- Explain the five general principles of the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics.

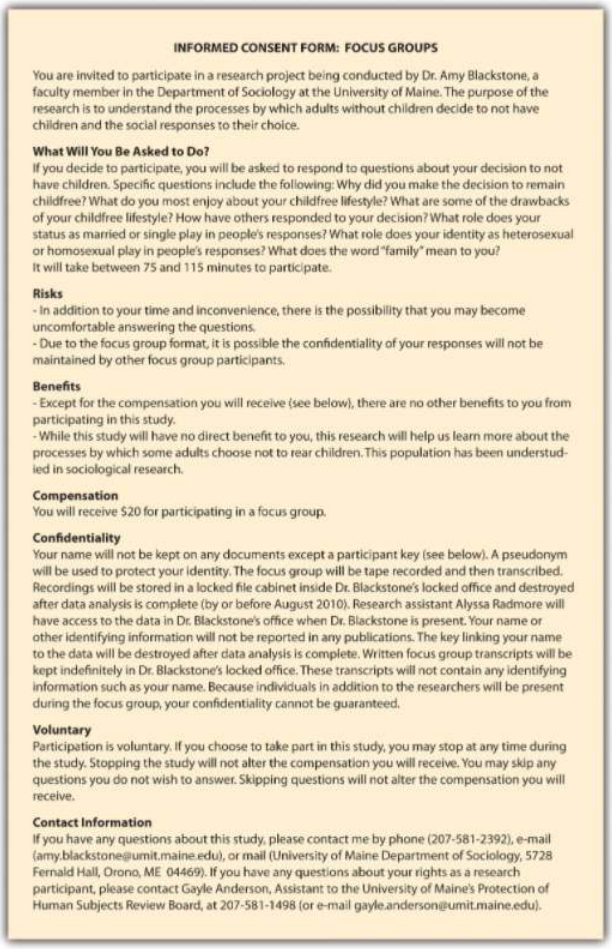
As should be clear by now, conducting research on humans presents a number of unique ethical considerations. Human research subjects must be given the opportunity to consent to their participation in research. Further, subjects' identities and the information they share should be protected by researchers. Of course, how consent and identity protection are defined may vary by individual researcher, institution, or academic discipline. In Section 7.1.1 "Research on Humans", we examined the role that institutions play in shaping research ethics. In this section, we'll take a look at a few specific topics that individual researchers and sociologists in general must consider before embarking on research with human subjects.

Informed Consent

A norm of voluntary participation is presumed in all sociological research projects. In other words, we cannot force anyone to participate in our research without that person's knowledge or consent (so much for that *Truman Show* experiment). Researchers must therefore design procedures to obtain subjects' **informed consent** to participate in their research. Informed consent is defined as a subject's voluntary agreement to participate in research based on a full understanding of the research and of the possible risks and benefits involved. Although it sounds simple, ensuring that one has actually obtained informed consent is a much more complex process than you might initially presume.

The first requirement is that, in giving their informed consent, subjects may neither waive nor even *appear* to waive any of their legal rights. Subjects also cannot release a researcher, his or her sponsor, or institution from any legal liability should something go wrong during the course of their participation in the research (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).US Department of Health and Human Services. (2009). Code of federal regulations (45 CFR 46). The full set of requirements for informed consent can be read at http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116. Because sociological research does not typically involve asking subjects to place themselves at risk of physical harm by, for example, taking untested drugs or consenting to new medical procedures, sociological researchers do not often worry about potential liability associated with their research projects. However, their research may involve other types of risks. For example, what if a sociological researcher fails to sufficiently conceal the identity of a subject who admits to participating in a local swinger's club, enjoying a little sadomasochistic activity now and again or violating her marriage vows? While the law may not have been broken in any of these cases, the subject's social standing, marriage, custody rights, or employment could be jeopardized were any of these tidbits to become public. This example might seem rather extreme, but the point remains: even sociologists conduct research that could come with some very real legal ramifications.

Beyond the legal issues, most institutional review boards (IRBs) require researchers to share some details about the purpose of the research, possible benefits of participation, and, most importantly, possible risks associated with participating in that research with their subjects. In addition, researchers must describe how they will protect subjects' identities, how and for how long any data collected will be stored, and whom to contact for additional information about the study or about subjects' rights. All this information is typically shared in an informed consent form that researchers provide to subjects. In some cases, subjects are asked to sign the consent form indicating that they have read it and fully understand its contents. In other cases, subjects are simply provided a copy of the consent form and researchers are responsible for making sure that subjects have read and understand the form before proceeding with any kind of data collection. Figure 7.1.2.1 "Sample Informed Consent Form" contains a sample informed consent form taken from a research project on child-free adults. Note that this consent form describes a risk that may be unique to the particular method of data collection being employed: focus groups.



INFORMED CONSENT FORM: FOCUS GROUPS

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Dr. Amy Blackstone, a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the University of Maine. The purpose of the research is to understand the processes by which adults without children decide to not have children and the social responses to their choice.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond to questions about your decision to not have children. Specific questions include the following: Why did you make the decision to remain childfree? What do you most enjoy about your childfree lifestyle? What are some of the drawbacks of your childfree lifestyle? How have others responded to your decision? What role does your status as married or single play in people's responses? What role does your identity as heterosexual or homosexual play in people's responses? What does the word "family" mean to you?
It will take between 75 and 115 minutes to participate.

Risks
- In addition to your time and inconvenience, there is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering the questions.
- Due to the focus group format, it is possible the confidentiality of your responses will not be maintained by other focus group participants.

Benefits
- Except for the compensation you will receive (see below), there are no other benefits to you from participating in this study.
- While this study will have no direct benefit to you, this research will help us learn more about the processes by which some adults choose not to rear children. This population has been understudied in sociological research.

Compensation
You will receive $20 for participating in a focus group.

Confidentiality
Your name will not be kept on any documents except a participant key (see below). A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. The focus group will be tape recorded and then transcribed. Recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet inside Dr. Blackstone's locked office and destroyed after data analysis is complete (by or before August 2010). Research assistant Alyssa Radmore will have access to the data in Dr. Blackstone's office when Dr. Blackstone is present. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. The key linking your name to the data will be destroyed after data analysis is complete. Written focus group transcripts will be kept indefinitely in Dr. Blackstone's locked office. These transcripts will not contain any identifying information such as your name. Because individuals in addition to the researchers will be present during the focus group, your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Voluntary
Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the study. Stopping the study will not alter the compensation you will receive. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Skipping questions will not alter the compensation you will receive.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study, please contact me by phone (207-581-2392), e-mail (amy.blackstone@umit.maine.edu), or mail (University of Maine Department of Sociology, 5728 Fernald Hall, Orono, ME 04469). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 207-581-1498 (or e-mail gayle.anderson@umit.maine.edu).

Figure 7.1.2.1: *Sample Informed Consent Form*

One last point to consider when preparing to obtain informed consent is that not all potential research subjects are considered equally competent or legally allowed to consent to participate in research. These subjects are sometimes referred to as members of **vulnerable populations**, people who may be at risk of experiencing undue influence or coercion.The US Department of Health and Human Services' guidelines on vulnerable populations can be read at http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/populations.

The rules for consent are more stringent for vulnerable populations. For example, minors must have the consent of a legal guardian in order to participate in research. In some cases, the minors themselves are also asked to participate in the consent process by signing special, age-appropriate consent forms designed specifically for them. Prisoners and parolees also qualify as vulnerable populations. Concern about the vulnerability of these subjects comes from the very real possibility that prisoners and parolees could perceive that they will receive some highly desired reward, such as early release, if they participate in research. Another potential concern regarding vulnerable populations is that they may be underrepresented in research, and even denied potential benefits of participation in research, specifically because of concerns about their ability to consent. So on the one hand, researchers must take extra care to ensure that their procedures for obtaining consent from vulnerable populations are not coercive. And the procedures for receiving approval to conduct research on these groups may be more rigorous than that for nonvulnerable populations. On the other hand, researchers must work to avoid excluding members of vulnerable populations from participation simply on the grounds that they are vulnerable or that obtaining their consent may be more complex. While there is no easy solution to this double-edged sword, an awareness of the potential concerns associated with research on vulnerable populations is important for identifying whatever solution is most appropriate for a specific case.

Protection of Identities

As mentioned earlier, the informed consent process includes the requirement that researchers outline how they will protect the identities of subjects. This aspect of the process, however, is one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of research.

In protecting subjects' identities, researchers typically promise to maintain either the **anonymity** or the **confidentiality** of their research subjects. Anonymity is the more stringent of the two. When a researcher promises anonymity to participants, not even the researcher is able to link participants' data with their identities. Anonymity may be impossible for some sociological researchers to promise because several of the modes of data collection that sociologists employ, such as participant observation and face-to-face interviewing, require that researchers know the identities of their research participants. In these cases, a researcher should be able to at least promise confidentiality to participants. Offering confidentiality means that some identifying information on one's subjects is known and may be kept, but only the researcher can link participants with their data and he or she promises not to do so publicly. As you can see under the "Risks" section of the consent form in Figure 7.1.2.1: *Sample Informed Consent Form*, sometimes it is not even possible to promise that a subject's confidentiality will be maintained. This is the case if data are collected in public or in the presence of other research participants in the course of a group interview, for example.

Protecting research participants' identities is not always a simple prospect, especially for those conducting research on stigmatized groups or illegal behaviors. Sociologist Scott DeMuth learned that all too well when conducting his dissertation research on a group of animal rights activists. As a participant observer, DeMuth knew the identities of his research subjects. So when some of his research subjects vandalized facilities and removed animals from several research labs at the University of Iowa, a grand jury called on Mr. DeMuth to reveal the identities of the participants in the raid. When DeMuth refused to do so, he was jailed briefly and then charged with conspiracy to commit animal enterprise terrorism and cause damage to the animal enterprise (Jaschik, 2009).Jaschik, S. (2009, December 4). Protecting his sources. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/12/04/demuth

Publicly, DeMuth's case raised many of the same questions as Laud Humphreys' work 40 years earlier. What do social scientists owe the public? Is DeMuth, by protecting his research subjects, harming those whose labs were vandalized? Is he harming the taxpayers who funded those labs? Or is it more important that DeMuth emphasize what he owes his research subjects, who were told their identities would be protected? DeMuth's case also sparked controversy among academics, some of whom thought that as an academic himself, DeMuth should have been more sympathetic to the plight of the faculty and students who lost years of research as a result of the attack on their labs. Many others stood by DeMuth, arguing that the personal and academic freedom of scholars must be protected whether we support their research topics and subjects or not. DeMuth's academic adviser even created a new group, Scholars for Academic Justice (http://sajumn.wordpress.com), to support DeMuth and other academics who face persecution or prosecution as a result of the research they conduct. What do you think? Should DeMuth have revealed the identities of his research subjects? Why or why not?

Disciplinary Considerations

Often times specific disciplines will provide their own set of guidelines for protecting research subjects and, more generally, for conducting ethical research. For sociologists, the American Sociological Association (ASA) has adopted a set of ethical principles intended to guide researchers in the discipline (2008).American Sociological Association. (2008). *Code of ethics and policies and procedures of the ASA committee on professional ethics*. Washington, DC: ASA. The ASA Code features the following five general principles:

1. Professional competence
2. Integrity
3. Professional and scientific responsibility
4. Respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity
5. Social responsibility

The principle of professional competence states that researchers should recognize their own limitations and only conduct research for which they have been properly trained. It also states that researchers should engage in ongoing education for themselves in order to remain competent. The principle of integrity directs that sociologists be "honest, fair, and respectful" in *all* their professional activities including, but not limited to, their research activities. The third principle, professional and scientific responsibility, guides sociologists to be respectful in their relationships with one another at the same time that it warns against collegiality if it impedes one's ability to behave ethically. This principle balances scientific collegiality with public trust in sociology. The fourth principle, respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity, addresses the need to reduce bias in all professional activities. Finally, social responsibility, the fifth principle, states that sociologists should "strive to advance the science of sociology and serve the public good."

On their faces, these five principles seem straightforward and relatively easy to abide by. Of course, each of these principles, along with the 20, more specific ethical standards that follow in the ASA Code, must be interpreted by individual researchers. Consider, for example, how those who support Scott DeMuth's decision to remain silent about his research subjects' identities might differ in their understanding of the principles from those who feel that DeMuth should testify and break his promise of confidentiality to subjects.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Researchers must obtain the informed consent of the people who participate in their research.
- If a researcher promises anonymity, he or she cannot link individual participants with their data.
- If a researcher promises confidentiality, he or she promises not to reveal the identities of research participants, even though the researcher can link individual participants with their data.
- The ASA has developed a Code of Ethics to which American sociologists are expected to adhere.

EXERCISES

1. Go to the Scholars for Academic Justice website at http://sajumn.wordpress.com. What is your position on the cases that are described there?
2. Look up the American Sociological Association's full Code of Ethics, which includes ethical guidelines for research as well as guidelines for the other roles that sociologists play, such as teaching, at http://asanet.org/images/asa/docs/pdf/CodeofEthics.pdf. Can you find the five principles noted previously? What more have you learned about the ASA Code of Ethics by reviewing the full code online?

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7.1.3: Ethics at Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Identify and distinguish between micro-, meso-, and macrolevel considerations with respect to the ethical conduct of social scientific research.

One useful way to think about the breadth of ethical questions that might arise out of any research project is to think about potential issues from the perspective of different analytical levels. In Chapter 1.2 "Linking Methods With Theory", you learned about the micro, meso, and macro levels of inquiry and how a researcher's specific point of focus might vary depending on his or her level of inquiry. Here we'll apply the micro-meso-macro framework to a discussion of research ethics. Within most research projects, there are specific questions that arise for researchers at each of these three levels.

At the **micro level**, researchers must consider their own conduct and the rights of individual research participants. For example, did Stanley Milgram behave ethically when he allowed research participants to think that they were administering electronic shocks to fellow participants? Did Laud Humphreys behave ethically when he deceived his research subjects about his own identity? Were the rights of individuals in these studies protected? While there may not be any easy answers, the questions posed here are the sort that you will want to ask yourself as a researcher when considering ethics at the micro level.

At the **meso level**, researchers should think about the expectations of their given profession (in this case, sociology). As discussed in Section 7.1.2 "Specific Ethical Issues to Consider", the American Sociological Association (ASA) has a Code of Ethics that outlines our profession's expectations when it comes to how we conduct our research. The ASA also has a strong history of supporting sociologists who conduct research in a way that follows the Code of Ethics but for which they experience some legal trouble. In 2009, for example, when Scott DeMuth was facing terrorism charges, the ASA's Animals and Societies Section wrote a public statement in support of DeMuth.Council of the Animals and Society Section of the American Sociological Association: Support for Scott DeMuth. (2009). Retrieved from http://davenportgrandjury.wordpress.com/solidarity-statements/council-animals-society-as Sixteen years earlier, in 1993, the ASA wrote an amicus brief in support of Washington State University sociology graduate student Rik Scarce who, like DeMuth, was conducting a study of animal rights activism for his dissertation research.American Sociological Association. (1993). Case 99: A real case involving the protection of confidential data. Retrieved from http://www.asanet.org/ethics/detail.cfm?id=Case99 Scarce spent 159 days in jail because he refused to share with authorities the nature of conversations he'd had with several of his research participants, animal rights activists suspected of vandalizing animal research facilities (Scarce v. United States, 1993).*Scarce v. United States*, 5 F.3d 397, 399–400 (9th Cir. 1993).

Finally, at the **macro level**, a researcher should consider her or his duty to, and the expectations of, society. Perhaps the most high-profile case involving macrolevel questions of research ethics comes from debates over whether to use data gathered by, or cite published studies based on data gathered from, the Nazis in the course of their unethical and horrendous experiments on humans during World War II (Moe, 1984).Moe, K. (1984). Should the Nazi research data be cited? *The Hastings Center Report*, *14*, 5–7. Some argue that because the data were gathered in such an unquestionably unethical manner, they should never be used. Further, some who argue against using the Nazi data point out that not only were the experiments immoral but the methods used to collect data were also scientifically questionable. The data, say these people, are neither valid nor reliable and should therefore not be used in any current scientific investigation (Berger, 1990).Berger, P. L. (1990). Nazi science: The Dachau hypothermia experiments. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *322*, 1435–1440.

On the other hand, some people argue that data themselves are neutral; that "information gathered is independent of the ethics of the methods and that the two are not linked together" (Pozos, 1992, p. 104).Pozos, R. S. (1992). Scientific inquiry and ethics: The Dachau data. In A. L. Caplan (Ed.), *When medicine went mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust* (p. 104). Totowa, NJ: Humana Press. Others point out that not using the data could inadvertently strengthen the claims of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened. In his striking statement in support of publishing the data, medical ethics professor Velvl Greene says,

Instead of banning the Nazi data or assigning it to some archivist or custodial committee, I maintain that it be exhumed, printed, and disseminated to every medical school in the world along with the details of methodology and the names of the doctors who did it, whether or not they were indicted, acquitted, or hanged.…Let the students and the residents and the young doctors know that this was not ancient history or an episode from a horror movie where the actors get up after filming and prepare for another role. It was real. It happened yesterday. (Greene, 1992, pp. 169–170)Greene, V. W. (1992). Can scientists use information derived from the concentration camps? Ancient anwers to new questions. In A. L. Caplan (Ed.), *When medicine went mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust* (pp. 169–170). Totowa, NJ: Humana Press.

While debates about the use of data collected by the Nazis are typically centered on medical scientists' use of them, there are conceivable circumstances under which these data might be used by social scientists. Perhaps, for example, a social scientist might wish to examine contemporary reactions to the experiments. Or perhaps the data could be used in a study of the sociology of science. What do you think? Should data gathered by the Nazis be used or cited today? What arguments can you make in support of your position, and how would you respond to those who disagree?

Table 7.1.3.1 "Key Ethics Questions at Three Different Levels of Inquiry" summarizes the key questions that researchers might ask themselves about the ethics of their research at each level of inquiry.

Table 7.1.3.1: Key Ethics Questions at Three Different Levels of Inquiry

Level of inquiry	Focus	Key ethics questions for researchers to ask themselves
Micro	Individual	Does my research impinge on the individual's right to privacy?
		Could my research offend subjects in any way?
		Could my research cause emotional distress to any of my subjects?
		Has my own conduct been ethical throughout the research process?
Meso	Group	Does my research follow the ethical guidelines of my profession and discipline?
		Have I met my duty to those who funded my research?
Macro	Society	Does my research meet societal expectations of social research?
		Have I met my social responsibilities as a researcher?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- At the micro level, researchers should consider their own conduct and the rights of individual research participants.
- At the meso level, researchers should consider the expectations of their profession and of any organizations that may have funded their research.
- At the macro level, researchers should consider their duty to and the expectations of society with respect to social scientific research.

EXERCISES

1. The ASA website offers a case study of Rik Scarce's experience with protecting his data. You can read the case, and some thought-provoking questions about it, here: http://www.asanet.org/ethics/detail.cfm?id=Case99. What questions and concerns about conducting sociological research does Scarce's experience raise for you?
2. The PBS series NOVA has an informative website and exercise on public opinion of the use of the Nazi experiment data. Go through the exercise at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiments.html.

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7.1.4: The Practice of Science Versus the Uses of Science

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define replication, and be able to describe why it matters in terms of research ethics.
2. Describe what it means to use science in an ethical way.

Research ethics has to do with both how research is conducted and how findings from that research are used and by whom. In this section, we'll consider research ethics from both angles.

Doing Science the Ethical Way

As you should now be aware, researchers must consider their own personal ethical principles in addition to following those of their institution, their discipline, and their community. We've already considered many of the ways that sociologists work to ensure the ethical practice of research, such as informing and protecting subjects. But the practice of ethical research doesn't end once subjects have been identified and data have been collected. Sociologists must also fully disclose their research procedures and findings. This means being honest about how research subjects were identified and recruited, how exactly data were collected and analyzed, and ultimately, what findings were reached.

If researchers fully disclose how they conducted their research, then those of us who use their work to build our own research projects, to create social policies, or to make decisions about our lives can have some level of confidence in the work. By sharing how research was conducted, a researcher helps assure readers that he or she has conducted legitimate research and didn't simply come to whatever conclusions he or she *wanted* to find. A description or presentation of research findings that is not accompanied by information about research methodology is missing some relevant information. Sometimes methodological details are left out because there isn't time or space to share them. This is often the case with news reports of research findings. Other times, there may be a more insidious reason that that important information isn't there. This may be the case if sharing methodological details would call the legitimacy of a study into question. As researchers, it is our ethical responsibility to fully disclose our research procedures. As consumers of research, it is our ethical responsibility to pay attention to such details. We'll discuss this more in the section "Using Science the Ethical Way."

There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that depicts a set of filing cabinets that aptly demonstrates what we don't want to see happen with research. Each filing cabinet drawer in the cartoon is labeled differently. The labels include such headings as, "Our Facts," "Their Facts," "Neutral Facts," "Disputable Facts," "Absolute Facts," "Bare Facts," "Unsubstantiated Facts," and "Indisputable Facts" (http://www.cartoonbank.com/1977/filing-cabinets-labeled-our-facts-their-facts-neutral-facts-disputable-facts-etc/invt/116530). The implication of this cartoon is that one might just choose to open the file drawer of her choice and pick whichever facts she likes best. While this may occur if we use some of the alternative sources of knowledge described in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", it is fortunately *not* how the discovery of facts works in sociology, or in any other science for that matter. There actually *is* a method to this madness we call research.

The requirement of honesty comes not only from the American Sociological Association's principles of integrity and scientific responsibility but also out of the scientific principle of **replication**. Ideally, this means that one scientist could repeat another's study with relative ease. By replicating a study, we may become more (or less) confident in the original study's findings. Replication is far more difficult (perhaps impossible) to achieve in the case of ethnographic studies that last months or years, but it nevertheless sets an important standard for all social scientific researchers: that we provide as much detail as possible about the processes by which we reach our conclusions.

Full disclosure also includes the need to be honest about a study's strengths and weaknesses, both with oneself and with others. Being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own work can help a researcher make reasonable recommendations about the next steps other researchers might consider taking in their inquiries. Awareness and disclosure of a study's strengths and weaknesses can also help highlight the theoretical or policy implications of one's work. In addition, openness about strengths and weaknesses helps those reading the research better evaluate the work and decide for themselves how or whether to rely on its findings. Finally, openness about a study's sponsors is crucial. How can we effectively evaluate research without knowing who paid the bills?

The standard of replicability along with openness about a study's strengths, weaknesses, and funders enable those who read the research to evaluate it fairly and completely. Knowledge of funding sources is often raised as an issue in medical research.

Understandably, independent studies of new drugs may be more compelling to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) than studies touting the virtues of a new drug that happen to have been funded by the company who created that drug. But medical researchers aren't the only ones who need to be honest about their funding. If we know, for example, that a political think tank with ties to a particular party has funded some sociological research, we can take that knowledge into consideration when reviewing the study's findings and stated policy implications. Lastly, and related to this point, we must consider how, by whom, and for what purpose research may be used.

Using Science the Ethical Way

Science has many uses. By "use" I mean the ways that science is understood and applied (as opposed to the way it is conducted). Some use science to create laws and social policies; others use it to understand themselves and those around them. Some people rely on science to improve their life conditions or those of other people, while still others use it to improve their businesses or other undertakings. In each case, the most ethical way for us to use science is to educate ourselves about the design and purpose of any studies we may wish to use or apply, to recognize our limitations in terms of scientific and methodological knowledge and how those limitations may impact our understanding of research, and to apply the findings of scientific investigation only in cases or to populations for which they are actually relevant.

Social scientists who conduct research on behalf of organizations and agencies may face additional ethical questions about the use of their research, particularly when the organization for which an applied study is conducted controls the final report and the publicity it receives. As mentioned in Chapter 1.1 "Introduction", after graduating from college with a sociology degree, I worked for an evaluation research firm. The firm I worked for is in fact just one division of a larger, nonprofit social services organization. The research division of this organization conducts in-house evaluations of the effectiveness of its own programs (and also provides evaluation research consulting to other, outside agencies). While I never saw any questionable practices with respect to the uses of science while there, the *potential* conflict of interest between in-house evaluation researchers and the employer being evaluated certainly exists. A similar conflict of interest might exist between independent researchers whose work is being funded by some government agency or private foundation.

So who decides what constitutes ethical conduct or use of research? Perhaps we all do. What qualifies as ethical research may shift over time and across cultures as individual researchers; disciplinary organizations; members of society; and regulatory entities such as institutional review boards, courts, and lawmakers all work to define the boundaries between ethical and unethical research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Conducting research ethically requires that researchers be ethical not only in their data collection procedures but also in reporting their methods and findings.
- The ethical use of research requires an effort to understand research, an awareness of one's own limitations in terms of knowledge and understanding, and the honest application of research findings.
- What qualifies as ethical research is determined collectively by a number of individuals, organizations, and institutions and may change over time.

EXERCISES

1. Think of an instance when doing science ethically might conflict with using science ethically. Describe your example and how you, as a researcher, might proceed were you to find yourself in such a quandary.
2. Using library and Internet resources, find three examples of funded sociological research. Who were the funders in each case? How do the researchers inform readers about their funders? In what ways, if any, do you think each funder might influence the research? What questions, if any, do you have about the research after taking these potential influences into consideration?

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