



This is “Introduction”, chapter 1 from the book [Sociological Inquiry Principles: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

This book is licensed under a [Creative Commons by-nc-sa 3.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>) license. See the license for more details, but that basically means you can share this book as long as you credit the author (but see below), don't make money from it, and do make it available to everyone else under the same terms.

This content was accessible as of December 29, 2012, and it was downloaded then by [Andy Schmitz](#) (<http://lardbucket.org>) in an effort to preserve the availability of this book.

Normally, the author and publisher would be credited here. However, the publisher has asked for the customary Creative Commons attribution to the original publisher, authors, title, and book URI to be removed. Additionally, per the publisher's request, their name has been removed in some passages. More information is available on this project's [attribution page](http://2012books.lardbucket.org/attribution.html?utm_source=header) (http://2012books.lardbucket.org/attribution.html?utm_source=header).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#) (<http://2012books.lardbucket.org/>). You can browse or download additional books there.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Research Methods for Everyday Life

Do you like to know things? Do you ever wonder what other people know or how they know what they do? Have you ever made a decision, and do you plan to make decisions in the future? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you will probably find the information in this book—particularly the information on research methods—very useful. If you answered no to all of them, I suspect that you will have reconsidered by the time you finish reading this text. Let's begin by focusing on the information in this chapter. Here we'll consider the variety of ways that we know things and what makes social scientific knowledge unique. We'll also consider why any of this might matter to you and preview what's to come in later chapters.

1.1 How Do We Know What We Know?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define research methods.
2. Identify and describe the various ways of knowing presented in this section.
3. Understand the weaknesses of nonsystematic ways of knowing.
4. 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**¹. 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

1. A systematic process of inquiry applied to learn something about our social world.

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**². 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.

2. Making observations without any systematic process for observing or assessing accuracy of what is observed.

3. Noticing only patterns that one has experienced directly or wishes to find.

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**³ 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**⁴, assuming that broad patterns exist based on very limited observations.

Figure 1.1



If we were to conclude, based on this photo, that all babies wear green, we would have committed selective observation.

© Thinkstock

4. 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.

Figure 1.2



If we were to conclude, based on this photo, that all babies wear top hats, we would have committed overgeneralization.

© Thinkstock

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**⁵ 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 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.

5. A socially defined source of knowledge.

Way of knowing	Description
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 "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.

Figure 1.3



We sometimes rely on authorities as sources of knowledge. For example, our parents might provide authoritative knowledge about how to cook.

© Thinkstock

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.

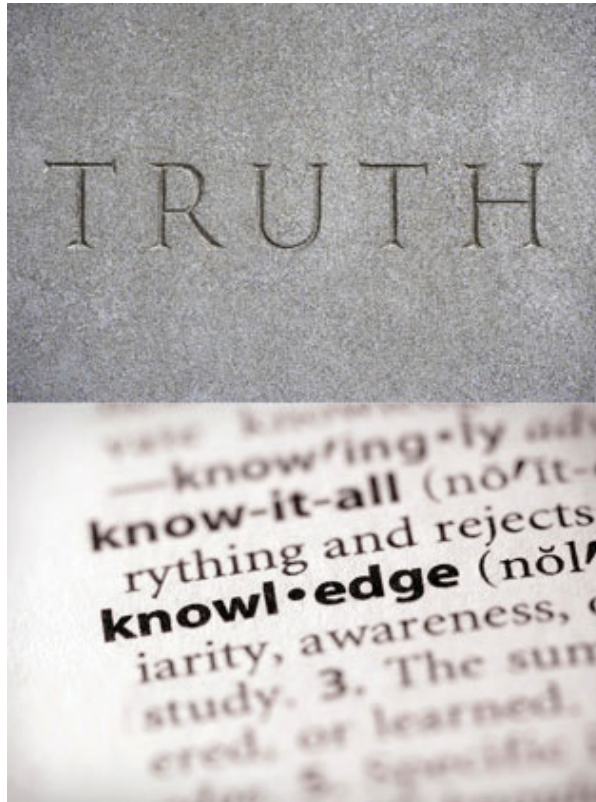
Ontology⁶ deals with the first part of these sorts of questions. It refers to one's analytic philosophy of the nature of reality. In sociology, a researcher's ontological position might shape the sorts of research questions he or she asks and how those questions are posed. Some sociologists take the 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**⁷ 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 8 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique"](#) through [Chapter 12 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis"](#), our chapters on data collection.

6. An analytic philosophy concerning the nature of reality.

7. An analytic philosophy concerning how we know what we know.

Figure 1.4



People's ontological and epistemological perspectives shape their beliefs about truth and knowledge.

© Thinkstock

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/.

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 "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 "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**⁸, 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 "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**⁹ 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 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.

8. A way of knowing that attempts to systematically collect and categorize facts or truths.

9. The scientific study of humans in groups.

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-/inv/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?

Figure 1.5



Studies show that a family's wealth can shape a child's educational experiences.

© Thinkstock

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.

Figure 1.6



Research shows that teachers treat boys and girls differently in the classroom.

© Thinkstock

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**¹⁰ 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**¹¹ 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

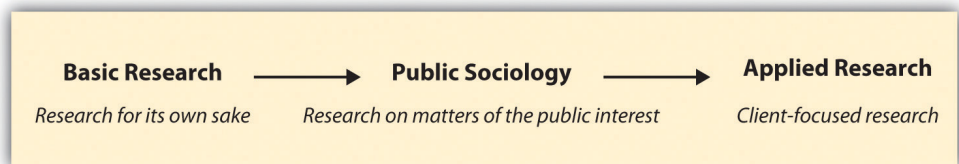
10. Sociology for sociology's sake; research that is motivated solely by researcher interest.

11. Research that is conducted for some purpose beyond or in addition to researcher interest.

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**¹² 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 1.7 Continuum of Sociological Research Types and Goals



- 12. The application of sociological theories and research to matters of public interest.
- 13. Ways of collecting data that yield results such as words or pictures.
- 14. Ways of collecting data that can be represented by and condensed into numbers.

One final consideration that social scientists must be aware of is the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. **Qualitative methods**¹³ 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**¹⁴, 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:

[\(click to see video\)](#)

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](http://asanet.org/images/press/docs/pdf/Amicus%20Brief%20Wal-Mart%20v%20Dukes%20et%20al.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

Figure 1.8



Every day we have the opportunity to read about the results of someone's research; just pick up a newspaper or magazine. Knowing how to evaluate research will help you understand which results to believe and which to question.

responsible consumer of public and popular information. And who wouldn't want to be more responsible?

© Thinkstock

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**¹⁵ 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**¹⁶ (<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.

15. Research conducted to assess the effects of specific programs or policies.

16. The General Social Survey (GSS) is one of the largest sources of social scientific data in the United States. Since 1972, GSS researchers have collected data on social trends, demographics, behaviors, beliefs, and change using survey interview techniques.

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>.

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 4 "Beginning a Research Project" through Chapter 7 "Sampling" 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 8 "Survey Research: A Quantitative Technique" through Chapter 12 "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 "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.