This is “Beginning a Research Project”, chapter 4 from the book Sociological Inquiry Principles: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods (index.html) (v. 1.0).

Chapter 4

Beginning a Research Project

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.

4.1 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.

Figure 4.1

One possible topic to investigate is what sociology majors plan to do after graduation.

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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**[1], 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?

1. Having an interest in a topic already, identifying a hobby, or looking for patterns in your everyday life about which you can ask questions.

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.

Figure 4.2

By "starting where she was," the author recently embarked on a study of adults without children.

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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 "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**[2] 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.

2. Predilections toward a particular perspective that may cause one to neglect alternative perspectives.

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

4.2 Is It Empirical?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

As you probably recall from Chapter 3 "Research Ethics", 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**[3]—those that can be answered by real experience in the real world—as opposed to **ethical questions**[4]—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

3. Questions that can be answered by real experience in the real world.

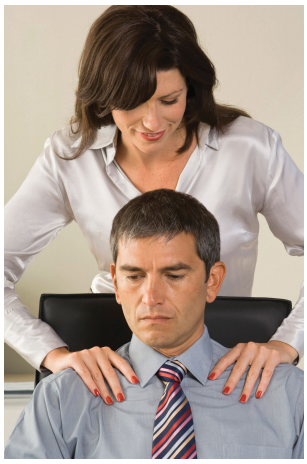
4. Questions about which people have moral opinions and that may not be answerable in reference to the real world.

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

Figure 4.3



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.

To say that women's harassment of men in the workplace is immoral is an ethical statement. To say that men experience feelings of stigma when they are harassed by women in the workplace is an empirical statement.

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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?

4.3 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 "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**[5] 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.

Figure 4.4

Next time you find yourself waiting in line, take a look around you. How might the social locations of the people in line with you vary? And how might those locations shape their experiences?

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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

5. A person's place in society, generally determined by a combination of aspects of a person's identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class status.

matching, and its impact on dating patterns more generally. In fact, according to **Sociological Abstracts**[6], 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.

Figure 4.5

The increasing popularity of online dating led sociologists to begin to examine this new pattern in mating and dating rituals.

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6. A database that indexes all major sociological research publications.

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**[7] 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 4.1 "Sociology Compared to Similar Disciplines: The Study of Gangs"

Table 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	What traumatic personal experiences or emotional				

7. A particular course of study; one division of several academic categories.

Sociology comparison	Psychology	Philosophy	Political science	Economics	History
others to join gangs?	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		
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				*Focus:* Economy in its own right	

Sociology comparison	Psychology	Philosophy	Political science	Economics	History
institutions or groups					
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?

4.4 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**[8] about that topic.For many researchers, forming hypotheses comes after developing one's research question. We'll discuss hypotheses in Chapter 5 "Research Design". 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.

8. A way of framing a scientist's particular problem of interest.

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 4.6 "Blocking the Shot" shows one such shot; Figure 4.7 "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 4.6 *Blocking the Shot*

Figure 4.7 *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 4.2 "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 4.2 "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 4.2 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	
		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
	Considers relationships	Unfocused	

Sample question	Question's strengths	Question's weaknesses	Proposed alternative
	among multiple concepts	Written as a yes/no	in healthy behaviors?
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 horror films and their contemporary remakes*. Honors college thesis, University of Maine, Orono, ME.	Written as a question 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.

4.5 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, which you'll learn more about in Chapter 5 "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 in Chapter 3 "Research Ethics". 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.

Figure 4.8

Barrie Thorne observed children's interactions with one another on playgrounds and in school to understand how they expressed and taught each other about gender.

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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, and summarizing the literature in Chapter 5 "Research Design", 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).

Figure 4.9

A visit to your campus library is highly recommended.

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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. We consider the stages of research design in Chapter 5 "Research Design".

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.