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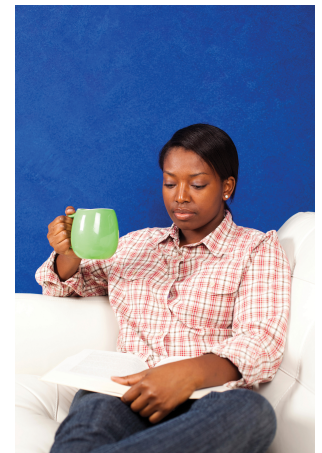
Chapter 14

Reading and Understanding Social Research

Sociology in Everyday Life

You might think that sociological research plays a very small role in our day-to-day lives, but once you know what to look for, you will soon discover that it is more a part of our everyday lives than you might have imagined. This is even truer now that you have taken a class in sociological research methods. Having some background in and understanding of the scientific method means that you are now better equipped to understand, question, and critique all kinds of scientific research as many of the basic tenets of good research are similar across disciplines that employ the scientific method. Those tenets include having a well-designed and carefully planned study, having some theoretical grounding and understanding of research that has come before one's own work, and engaging in peer review, to name just a few. In this chapter, we'll consider how to responsibly read research findings and examine areas of everyday life where sociological research may be present, even if it is not immediately visible.

As you read this chapter and [Chapter 15 "Research Methods in the Real World"](#), you may recall several of the topics and points made in other chapters of this text. The aim in these final chapters is to remind you of the relevance of sociological research and why one might care to know something about it. These chapters are also designed to encourage you to think critically about how sociology does and can shape your everyday life, both in ways you might choose and in ways you might not be aware of.



In this chapter, we'll consider how to responsibly read research findings and examine areas of everyday life where sociological

*research may be present, even if
it is not immediately visible.*

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14.1 Reading Reports of Sociological Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify what one can learn from an article simply by reading its abstract and its acknowledgments.
2. Describe how tables presenting causal relationships are typically presented.
3. Identify several key questions to ask when reading research reports.

By now you should have a good idea about the basic components of sociological research projects. You know how sociological research is designed, and you are familiar with how to frame a review of sociological literature. In [Chapter 5 "Research Design"](#), we discussed the various components of a research project and presented some tips on how to review literature as you design your own research project. But I hope that you'll find the sociological literature to be of interest and relevance to you beyond figuring out how to summarize and critique it in relation to your research plans. We sociologists like to think the research we do matters, but it cannot matter if our research reports go unread or are not understandable. In this section we'll review some material from [Chapter 5 "Research Design"](#) regarding sociological literature and we'll consider some additional tips for how to read and understand reports of sociological research.

As mentioned in [Chapter 5 "Research Design"](#), reading the abstract that appears in most reports of scholarly research will provide you with an excellent, easily digestible review of a study's major findings and of the framework the author is using to position her findings. Abstracts typically contain just a few hundred words, so reading them is a nice way to quickly familiarize yourself with a study. Another thing to look for as you set out to read and comprehend a research report is the author's acknowledgments. Who supported the work by providing feedback or other assistance? If relevant, are you familiar with the research of those who provided feedback on the report you are about to read? Are any organizations mentioned as having supported the research in some way, either through funding or by providing other resources to the researcher? Familiarizing yourself with an author's acknowledgments will give you additional contextual information within which to frame and understand what you are about to read.

Once you have read the abstract and acknowledgments, you could next peruse the discussion section near the end of the report, as suggested in [Chapter 5 "Research](#)

Design". You might also take a look at any tables that are included in the article. A **table**¹ provides a quick, condensed summary of the report's key findings. The use of tables is not limited to one form or type of data, though they are used most commonly in quantitative research. Tables are a concise way to report large amounts of data. Some tables present descriptive information about a researcher's sample. These tables will likely contain frequencies (N) and percentages (%). For example, if gender happened to be an important variable for the researcher's analysis, a descriptive table would show how many and what percent of all study participants are women and how many/what percent are men. Frequencies, or "how many," will probably be listed as N, while the percent symbol (%) might be used to indicate percentages.

In a table presenting a causal relationship, independent variable attributes are typically presented in the table's columns, while dependent variable attributes are presented in rows. This allows the reader to scan across a table's rows to see how values on the dependent variable attributes change as the independent variable attribute values change. Tables displaying results of quantitative analysis will also likely include some information about the strength and statistical significance of the relationships presented in the table. These details tell the reader how likely it is that the relationships presented will have occurred simply by chance.

Let's look at a specific example. **Table 14.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work"**, based on data from my study of older workers, presents the causal relationship between gender and experiencing harassing behaviors at work. In this example, gender is the independent variable and the harassing behaviors listed are the dependent variables. It wouldn't make any sense to say that people's workplace experiences *cause* their gender, so in this example, the question of which is the independent variable and which are the dependent variables has a pretty obvious answer. I have therefore placed gender in the table's columns and harassing behaviors in the table's rows. Reading across the table's top row, we see that 2.9% of women in the sample reported experiencing subtle or obvious threats to their safety at work, while 4.7% of men in the sample reported the same. We can read across each of the rows of the table in this way. Reading across the bottom row, we see that 9.4% of women in the sample reported experiencing staring or invasion of their personal space at work while just 2.3% of men in the sample reported having the same experience.

Of course, we cannot assume that these patterns didn't simply occur by chance. How confident can we be that the findings presented in the table did not occur by chance? This is where tests of statistical significance come in handy. **Statistical significance**² tells us the likelihood that the relationships we observe could be caused by something other than chance. While your statistics class will give you more specific details on tests of statistical significance and reading quantitative

1. A tool used by researchers who wish to present large amounts of data in a succinct format. Tables are most commonly used in reports of quantitative research findings.
2. A report of the likelihood that relationships observed could be caused by something other than chance.

tables, the important thing to be aware of as a nonexpert reader of tables is that some of the relationships presented will be statistically significant and others may not be. Tables should provide information about the statistical significance of the relationships presented. When reading a researcher’s conclusions, be sure to pay attention to which relationships are statistically significant and which are not.

In Table 14.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work", you’ll see that a *p* value is noted in the last very column of the table. A ***p* value**³ is a statistical measure of the probability that there is no relationship between the variables under study. Another way of putting this is that the *p* value provides guidance on whether or not we should reject the null hypothesis. The **null hypothesis**⁴ is simply the assumption that no relationship exists between the variables in question. In Table 14.1 "Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work", we see that for the first behavior listed, the *p* value is 0.623. This means that there is a 62.3% chance that the null hypothesis is correct in this case. In other words, it seems likely that any relationship between observed gender and experiencing threats to safety at work in this sample is simply due to chance.

In the final row of the table, however, we see that the *p* value is 0.039. In other words, there is a 3.9% chance that the null hypothesis is correct. Thus we can be somewhat more confident than in the preceding example that there may be some relationship between a person’s gender and his experiencing the behavior noted in this row. We might say that this finding is significant at the .05 level. This means that the probability that the relationship between gender and experiencing staring or invasion of personal space at work is due to sampling error alone is less than 5 in 100. Notice that I’m hedging my bets here by using words like *somewhat* and *may be*. When testing hypotheses, social scientists generally couch their findings in terms of rejecting the null hypothesis rather than making bold statements about the relationships observed in their tables. You can learn more about creating tables, reading tables, and tests of statistical significance in a class focused exclusively on statistical analysis. For now, I hope this brief introduction to reading tables will give you more confidence in your ability to read and understand the quantitative tables you encounter while reading reports of sociological research.

Table 14.1 Percentage Reporting Harassing Behaviors at Work

Behavior Experienced at work	Women	Men	<i>p</i> value
Subtle or obvious threats to your safety	2.9%	4.7%	0.623
Being hit, pushed, or grabbed	2.2%	4.7%	0.480
Note: Sample size was 138 for women and 43 for men.			

3. A statistical measure of the probability that there is no relationship between the variables under study.

4. The assumption that no relationship exists between variables in question.

Behavior Experienced at work	Women	Men	p value
Comments or behaviors that demean your gender	6.5%	2.3%	0.184
Comments or behaviors that demean your age	13.8%	9.3%	0.407
Staring or invasion of your personal space	9.4%	2.3%	0.039
Note: Sample size was 138 for women and 43 for men.			

Having read the tables in a research report, along with the abstract, acknowledgments, and discussion in the report, you are finally ready to read the report in its entirety. As you read a research report, there are several questions you can ask yourself about each section, from abstract to conclusion. Those questions are summarized in [Table 14.2 "Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports"](#). Keep in mind that the questions covered here are designed to help you, the reader, to think critically about the research you come across and to get a general understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and key takeaways from a given study. I hope that by considering how you might respond to the following questions while reading research reports, you'll feel confident that you could describe the report to others and discuss its meaning and impact with them.

Table 14.2 Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports

Report section	Questions worth asking
Abstract	What are the key findings? How were those findings reached? What framework does the researcher employ?
Acknowledgments	Who are this study's major stakeholders? Who provided feedback? Who provided support in the form of funding or other resources?
Introduction	How does the author frame his or her research focus? What other possible ways of framing the problem exist? Why might the author have chosen this particular way of framing the problem?
Literature review	How selective does the researcher appear to have been in identifying relevant literature to discuss? Does the review of literature appear appropriately extensive? Does the researcher provide a critical review?
Sample	Was probability sampling or nonprobability sampling employed? What is the researcher's sample? What is the researcher's population? What claims will the researcher be able to make based on the sample? What are the sample's major strengths and major weaknesses?
Data collection	How were the data collected? What do you know about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the method employed? What other methods of data collection might have been employed, and why was

Report section	Questions worth asking
	this particular method employed? What do you know about the data collection strategy and instruments (e.g., questions asked, locations observed)? What <i>don't</i> you know about the data collection strategy and instruments?
Data analysis	How were the data analyzed? Is there enough information provided that you feel confident that the proper analytic procedures were employed accurately?
Results	What are the study's major findings? Are findings linked back to previously described research questions, objectives, hypotheses, and literature? Are sufficient amounts of data (e.g., quotes and observations in qualitative work, statistics in quantitative work) provided in order to support conclusions drawn? Are tables readable?
Discussion/ conclusion	Does the author generalize to some population beyond her or his sample? How are these claims presented? Are claims made supported by data provided in the results section (e.g., supporting quotes, statistical significance)? Have limitations of the study been fully disclosed and adequately addressed? Are implications sufficiently explored?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In tables presenting causal relationships, the independent variable is typically presented in the table's columns while the dependent variables are presented in the table's rows.
- When reading a research report, there are several key questions you should ask yourself for each section of the report.

EXERCISES

1. Find a table in a research report of your choosing. Challenge yourself to summarize the relationships represented by the table. Check your work by reading the Findings section of the article.
2. Read a scholarly article from start to finish, answering the questions outlined in [Table 14.2 "Questions Worth Asking While Reading Research Reports"](#) as you read through each section.

14.2 Being a Responsible Consumer of Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Identify what one needs to do to be a responsible consumer of research.

Being a responsible consumer of research requires that you take seriously your identity as a social scientist. Now that you are familiar with how to conduct research and how to read the results of others' research, you have some responsibility to put your knowledge and skills to use. Doing so is in part a matter of being able to distinguish what you do know based on the information provided by research findings from what you do not know. It is also a matter of having some awareness about what you can and cannot reasonably know as you encounter research findings.

When assessing social scientific findings, think about what information has been provided to you. In a scholarly journal article, you will presumably be given a great deal of information about the researcher's method of data collection, her or his sample, and information about how the researcher identified and recruited research participants. All these details provide important contextual information that can help you assess the researcher's claims. If, on the other hand, you come across some discussion of social scientific research in a popular magazine or newspaper, chances are that you will not find the same level of detailed information that you would find in a scholarly journal article. In this case, what you do and do not know is more limited than in the case of a scholarly journal article.

Also take into account whatever information is provided about a study's funding source. Most funders want, and in fact require, that recipients acknowledge them in publications. But more popular press may leave out a funding source. In this Internet age, it can be relatively easy to obtain information about how a study was funded. If this information is not provided in the source from which you learned about a study, it might behoove you to do a quick search on the web to see if you can learn more about a researcher's funding. Findings that seem to support a particular political agenda, for example, might have more or less weight once you know whether and by whom a study was funded.

There is some information that even the most responsible consumer of research cannot know. Because researchers are ethically bound to protect the identities of their subjects, for example, we will never know exactly who participated in a given study. Researchers may also choose not to reveal any personal stakes they hold in the research they conduct. While researchers may "start where they are," a process outlined in [Chapter 4 "Beginning a Research Project"](#), we cannot know for certain whether or how researchers are personally connected to their work unless they choose to share such details. Neither of these "unknowables" is necessarily problematic, but having some awareness of what you may never know about a study does provide important contextual information from which to assess what one can "take away" from a given report of findings.

Figure 14.1



Information provided on the same study will vary dramatically depending on the source reporting the study's findings. In general, popular media and news sources will provide fewer details than scholarly sources such as academic journals.

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KEY TAKEAWAY

- Being a responsible consumer of research means giving serious thought to and understanding what you do know, what you don't know, what you can know, and what you can't know.

EXERCISE

1. Find a report of scholarly research in a newspaper. What do you know from the report? What don't you know? How might you find the answers to your remaining questions?

14.3 Media Reports of Sociological Research

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Cite the major differences between scholarly and media reports of sociological research.
2. Identify the kinds of questions that may remain unanswered in media reports of sociological research.

As you have probably already gathered, we are likely to encounter sociological research in the news and other media. For example, check out the American Sociological Association's media coverage links (http://www.asanet.org/press/media_coverage_highlights.cfm). There you'll see that for just one study, on the consequences of parental divorce for child development (Kim, 2011), Kim, H. S. (2011). Consequences of parental divorce for child development. *American Sociological Review*, 76, 487–511. there were 170 news articles describing the study and its findings over the course of one month, June 2011. This particular study provides a good example of the difference between the information provided about a study in a scholarly journal article and the media's coverage of the same study.

Let's look at some of the differences between the aforementioned study's coverage in the media and its treatment in a scholarly journal. First, watch the following coverage from *The View's* August 24, 2011, program: <http://theview.abc.go.com/video/hot-topics-effects-divorce-kids>. Once you have watched the clip, ask yourself what you have learned about the study. Who conducted the research described? What are the study's key findings? How many people participated in the study? Who were those participants? What sorts of data were analyzed? Which findings were statistically significant? Also note what questions you still have about the study. Where might you go to get the answers to your questions?

Figure 14.2



After watching *The View* clip several times, I was able to gather that the study has two key findings: (a) a child is more negatively affected by losing a parent to divorce than by the tension that leads to the breakup, and (b) children's math scores drop after a divorce but

reading and “other skills” do not suffer. As far as who participated, I heard that “3-year-olds and so on” were the participants, though I am not certain how many of them participated. I also don’t know who conducted the study, who (if anyone) provided funding for the study, when the data were collected, and so on. But if you review the article published in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) that reports results of the study, all these questions are answered.

A recent sociological study of the impact of parental divorce on children was covered in 170 popular media sources in one month alone.

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You might be saying to yourself, “So what?” Perhaps you took note that *The View* coverage *does* mention that the study was published in the ASR. If you did notice this, then kudos to you. Because the ASR is a peer-reviewed publication of the American Sociological Association, we should have some confidence that the study is reputable. But we still don’t hear all the information that might shape what we choose to take away from this study. For example, a review of the ASR article will tell us that the data come from a sample of people who were in kindergarten from 1998 to 1999. Perhaps that is of little consequence, but we might wish to pause to consider whether or how our cultural social context has shifted since 1998 and how that might impact how kindergartners *today* respond to parental divorce. I am not at all suggesting that only studies whose data are seconds or days old hold value. (If that were the case, I’d say we can safely disregard any of my own publications.) Instead, I want to call your attention to some of the questions you might ask yourself as a responsible consumer of research.

In addition to all the times that sociological research *does* make the news, there are also instances when it does not but probably should. In June 2011, for example, an article on children’s gender nonconformity appeared in the *New York Times* (Hoffman). Hoffman, J. (2011, June 10). “Boys will be boys?” Not in these families. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/fashion/new-challenge-for-parents-childrens-gender-roles.html?pagewanted=all> The article took the perspective that children’s expressions of gender were natural and biologically ingrained. While we cannot say for certain that this isn’t true, we *do* know from many years of reputable and highly regarded research by sociologists of gender that gender norms and behaviors are in many cases constructed *socially*, not biologically. That the article omits this perspective and the voices of sociologists who do research in this area is unfortunate—both for *New York Times*’ readers and for sociology.

Keeping in mind your knowledge about sociology and sociological research the next time you come across descriptions of sociological research in various media outlets, ask yourself some questions about the research you encounter.

1. Where do you see sociological research described?
2. How is it described?
3. What information is present, and what is missing from the media account of sociological research?
4. How and where might you access the details that are missing?

Keep an eye out for the absence of sociological research as well and consider the following:

1. Are there programs or news stories that might be well served to incorporate sociological research findings?
2. How might the inclusion of sociological research shift the story?

By asking yourself these questions as you go about your daily routine, you will have integrated sociological research into your everyday life.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Media reports of sociological research, while important, may leave key questions about the research unanswered.
- When reading media reports of sociological research, it is useful to follow up your reading by checking the original scholarly source in which the research is reported.

EXERCISES

1. Find a report of scholarly research in a nonscholarly source other than a newspaper. What would you say are the key takeaways reported by the nonscholarly source? Next, find and read a *scholarly* source's report of the same research. What would you say are the key takeaways reported by the scholarly source? How do the takeaways from each source differ? How are they similar? How has your own understanding of the work changed by reading the scholarly report?
2. Find a news story that you think could have be strengthened by the inclusion of sociological research. How might the inclusion of sociological research shift the story?

14.4 Sociological Research: It's Everywhere

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify locations where we might find examples of sociology and sociological research.
2. Describe how having a background in sociological research methods is useful for our everyday encounters with sociology.

A few years ago, I was at home minding my own business and watching one of my favorite shows, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, when sociology made an appearance. The episode, as I recall, centered on a child who was bullied at school because she had two mothers. In the show, the lawyers discuss research on parenting that was published in the *American Sociological Review*. While my search uncovered that the episode to which I'm referring originally aired on NBC on December 6, 2005, I have not been able to unearth the article to which the show's characters refer. The American Sociological Association does note, however, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit's* mention of the journal on its website: <http://www.asanet.org/news/2005.cfm>.

It's amazing where and how often you might discover sociology rearing its head when you begin to pay attention, look for it, and listen for it. The benefit of having knowledge about sociological research methods is that when sociology does appear in your everyday life, you'll be better equipped to understand those brief mentions than you would be without some background in research methods.

Sometimes we might come across sociological research and not even realize it. As you've seen in the examples described throughout this chapter, there are opportunities every day to encounter sociological research or, at the very least, its effects. Remember our discussion of the Walmart case in [Chapter 1 "Introduction"](#)? As you may recall, Professor William Bielby testified as a sociologist on behalf of the plaintiffs in the case. The Walmart case is a great example of sociology playing a role in matters of everyday life even when we may not realize it. Sociologists have participated as expert witnesses in numerous other cases as well. As a sociologist who studies workplace harassment, I was once called upon to offer the sociological perspective in sexual harassment suit. Professor Emeritus Lewis Yablonsky (2002) You can read more about the cases that Professor Yablonsky has been involved in in the following article he wrote for the American Sociological Association's newsletter in 2002: Yablonsky, L. (2002, January). Sociologists as

expert witnesses in the criminal justice system. *Footnotes*. Retrieved from <http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/jan02/fn17.html> has been involved in more than 50 cases, providing his expert sociological opinion on cases involving homicide and other forms of violence.

In addition to offering their expert testimony in court cases and law suits, sociologists also play a role in shaping social policy. Professor Valerie Jenness, for example, has consulted with the state of California to help craft corrections policies there, particularly those focused on transgender inmates, sexual assault in correctional facilities, and hate crime statute implementation (<http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/Jenness.cfm>). Professor Diane Vaughn, an organizational sociologist, participated in the investigation following the space shuttle *Columbia*'s disintegration during reentry in 2003. Vaughn's sociological perspective added a social dimension to the investigation and helped identify the social and cultural factors at NASA that contributed to the *Columbia*'s demise (<http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/vaughan.cfm>). Finally, Dr. Darlene Iskra's research "had a dramatic impact on national policy" (<http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public/segal.cfm>) when her work on gender discrimination in the military led to legislation that eliminated unequal requirements for men and women personnel serving in Saudi Arabia ("What is a trailblazer?," 2011). What is a trailblazer? Dr. Darlene Iskra, adjunct instructor, sociology, is a Navy pioneer. (2011, July 15). *Columbia College Spotlights*. Retrieved from <http://spotlight.ccis.edu/2011/07/what-is-trailblazer.html> These are just a few of the many examples of how the sociological perspective and sociological researchers have played a role in shaping our policies. A useful source for additional examples is the American Sociological Association's descriptions of past winners of its prestigious Public Understanding of Sociology Award. Those descriptions can be found at <http://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public.cfm>.

Another way that we might inadvertently come across sociology is when we encounter the ever-popular armchair sociologist. Perhaps you've met some of these folks or even played the role yourself a time or two. Armchair sociologists tend to wax poetic about how society "is" or how various groups of people "are" without having anything more than anecdotal evidence (or perhaps no evidence at all) to support their sweeping claims. Remember the example from [Chapter 1 "Introduction"](#) about a friend who once proclaimed that "all men lie all the time?" That's a perfect example of armchair sociology. Now that you are equipped with a better understanding of how we know what we know, and in particular how sociologists know what they

Figure 14.3



know, you are well prepared to question the assumptions of the armchair sociologists you meet. And by sharing with others what you know about how we “know” things, perhaps you’ll even help others break the habit of making unfounded assumptions. Understanding sociological research methods is excellent preparation for questioning the everyday assumptions that others make. And let’s face it; we’ve all probably made some unfounded assumptions about the way the world works or about what “other” people are like at one time or another.

In some ways, we are all armchair sociologists. While each of us, at one time or another, may have made some unfounded assumptions about the way the world works, having a background in sociological research methods can help us question those kinds of assumptions.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sociological research appears in many areas of our lives and sometimes in unexpected locations.
- Having an understanding of sociological research methods can be of benefit in areas of your life outside of the classroom.

EXERCISE

1. Find evidence of sociological research in a location where you did not expect to find it or may not have found it if not deliberately seeking it out. Ask two or three of your peers to do the same and then swap stories. Where did you find sociology? How did you find it? What relevance does sociology have to the example that you found? How did your knowledge about research methods help you identify or understand the instance of sociology that you found?