Chapter 1
The Sociological Perspective

Learning Objectives

1.1 Explain how the sociological perspective differs from common sense.
1.2 State several reasons that a global perspective is important in today’s world.
1.3 Identify the advantages of sociological thinking for developing public policy, for encouraging personal growth, and for advancing in a career.
1.4 Link the origins of sociology to historical social changes.
1.5 Summarize sociology’s major theoretical approaches.
1.6 Apply sociology’s major theoretical approaches to the topic of sports.
The Power of Society
to guide our choices in marriage partners

Do we simply "pick" our marriage partners? In 77 percent of all married couples in the United States, both partners are within five years of age of each other; in 78 percent, both partners have achieved the same level of schooling; and in 92 percent of married couples, both partners are of the same racial or ethnic category. Although we tend to think of love and marriage as very personal matters, it is clear that society guides the process of selecting a spouse.
Chapter Overview

You are about to begin a course that could change your life. Sociology is a new and exciting way of understanding the world around you. It will change what you see and how you think about the world around you, and it may well change how you think about yourself. Chapter 1 of the text introduces the discipline of sociology. The most important skill to gain from this chapter is the ability to use what we call the sociological perspective. This chapter also introduces sociological theory, which helps you build understanding from what you see using the sociological perspective.

From the moment he first saw Tonya step off the subway train, Dwayne knew she was “the one.” As the two walked up the stairs to the street and entered the building where they were both taking classes, Dwayne tried to get Tonya to stop and talk. At first, she ignored him. But after class, they met again, and she agreed to join him for coffee. That was three months ago. Today, they are engaged to be married.

If you were to ask people in the United States, “Why do couples like Tonya and Dwayne marry?” it is a safe bet that almost everyone would reply, “People marry because they fall in love.” Most of us find it hard to imagine a happy marriage without love; for the same reason, when people fall in love, we expect them to think about getting married.

But is the decision about whom to marry really just a matter of personal feelings? There is plenty of evidence to show that if love is the key to marriage, Cupid’s arrow is carefully aimed by the society around us.

Society has many “rules” about whom we should and should not marry. Up until about a decade ago, all states had laws that ruled out half the population by banning people from marrying someone of the same sex, even if the couple was deeply in love. But there are other rules as well. Sociologists have found that people, especially when they are young, are very likely to marry someone close in age, and people of all ages typically marry others in the same racial category, of similar social class background, of much the same level of education, and with a similar degree of physical attractiveness (Schwartz & Mare, 2005; Schoen & Cheng, 2006; Feng Hou & Myles, 2008; Shafer & Zhenchao, 2010; Shafer, 2013; see Chapter 18, “Families,” for details). People do end up making choices about whom to marry, but society narrows the field long before they do.

When it comes to love, the decisions people make do not simply result from the process philosophers call “free will.” Sociology shows us the power of society to guide all our life decisions in much the same way that the seasons influence our choice of clothing.

The Sociological Perspective

1.1 Explain how the sociological perspective differs from common sense.

Sociology is the systematic study of human society. Society refers to people who live in a defined territory and share a way of life. At the heart of sociology’s investigation of society is a special point of view called the sociological perspective.

Seeing the General in the Particular

One good way to define the sociological perspective is seeing the general in the particular (Berger, 1963). This definition tells us that sociologists look for general patterns in the behavior of particular people. Although every individual is unique, a society shapes the lives of people in patterned ways that are evident as we discover how various categories (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor) live very differently. We begin to see the world sociologically by realizing how the general categories into which we fall shape our particular life experiences.
For example, the Power of Society figure shows how the social world guides people to select marriage partners from within their own social categories. This is why the large majority of married couples are about the same age, have similar educational backgrounds, and share the same racial and ethnic identity. What about social class? How does social class position affect what women look for in a spouse? In a classic study of women’s hopes for their marriages, Lillian Rubin (1976) found that higher-income women typically expected the men they married to be sensitive to others, to talk readily, and to share feelings and experiences. Lower-income women, she found, had very different expectations and were looking for men who did not drink too much, were not violent, and held steady jobs. Obviously, what women expect in a marriage partner has a lot to do with social class position.

This text explores the power of society to guide our actions, thoughts, and feelings. We may think that marriage results simply from the personal feelings of love. Yet the sociological perspective shows us that factors such as age, schooling, race and ethnicity, sex, and social class guide our selection of a partner. It might be more accurate to think of love as a feeling we have for others who match up with what society teaches us to want in a mate.

Seeing the Strange in the Familiar

At first, using the sociological perspective may seem like seeing the strange in the familiar. Consider how you might react if someone were to say to you, “You fit all the right categories, which means you would make a wonderful spouse!” We are used to thinking that people fall in love and decide to marry based on personal feelings. But the sociological perspective reveals the initially strange idea that society shapes what we think and do.

Because we live in an individualistic society, learning to see how society affects us may take a bit of practice. If someone asked you why you “chose” to enroll at your particular college, you might offer one of the following reasons:

“I wanted to stay close to home.”
“I got a basketball scholarship.”
“With a journalism degree from this university, I can get a good job.”
“My girlfriend goes to school here.”
“I didn’t get into the school I really wanted to attend.”

Any of these responses may well be true. But do they tell the whole story?
Window on the World

- Cindy Rucker, 29 years old, recently took time off from her job in the New Orleans public school system to have her first child.
- Although she is only 28 years old, Bakhtnizar Kahn has five children, a common pattern in Afghanistan.

Global Map 1–1 Women’s Childbearing in Global Perspective

Is childbearing simply a matter of personal choice? A look around the world shows that it is not. In general, women living in poor countries have many more children than women in rich nations. Can you point to some of the reasons for this global disparity? In simple terms, such differences mean that if you had been born into another society (whether you are female or male), your life might be quite different from what it is now.

SOURCES: Data from Population Reference Bureau (2014), Martin et al. (2015).

Thinking sociologically about going to college, it’s important to realize that only 7 out of every 100 people in the world have earned a college degree, with the enrollment rate much higher in high-income nations than in poor countries (Barro & Lee, 2010; OECD, 2012; World Bank, 2012). A century ago, even in the United States most people had little or no chance to go to college. Today, enrolling in college is within the reach of far more men and women. But a look around the classroom shows that social forces still have much to do with who ends up on campus. For instance, most U.S. college students are young, generally between eighteen and about thirty. Why? Because our society links college attendance to this period of life. But more than age is involved, because just 42 percent of men and women between eighteen and twenty-four actually end up on campus.

Another factor is cost. Because higher education is so expensive, college students tend to come from families with above-average incomes. As Chapter 20 ("Education") explains, if you are lucky enough to belong to a family earning more than $119,000 a year, you are almost 60 percent more likely to go to college than someone whose family earns less than $28,000. Is it reasonable, in light of these facts, to ignore the power of society and say that attending college is simply a matter of personal choice?

Seeing Society in Our Everyday Lives

Another way to appreciate the power of society is to consider the number of children women have. As shown in Global Map 1–1, the average woman in the United States has about two children during her lifetime. In the Philippines, however, the average is about three; in Guatemala, about four; in Afghanistan, five; in Uganda, six; and in Niger, the average woman has more than seven children (Population Reference Bureau, 2014).
The wealthy have much more freedom than the poor, but once again, at the cost of a higher suicide rate.

A century later, Durkheim’s analysis still holds true. Figure 1–1 shows suicide rates for various categories of people in the United States. Keep in mind that suicide is very rare—a rate of 10 suicides for every 100,000 people is about the same as 6 inches in a mile. Even so, we can see some interesting patterns. In 2013, there were 17 recorded suicides for every 100,000 white people, three times the rate for African Americans (5.6) or Hispanics (5.3). For all categories of people, suicide was more common among men than among women. White men (26.9) were more than three times as likely as white women (7.5) to take their own lives. Among African Americans, the rate for men (9.5) was almost five times higher than for women (2.1). Among Hispanics, the rate for men (8.3) was nearly four times higher than the rate for women (2.2) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Applying Durkheim’s logic, the higher suicide rate among white people and men reflects their greater wealth and freedom, just as the lower rate among women and African Americans reflects their limited social choices. As Durkheim did a century ago, we can see general patterns in the personal actions of particular individuals.

### Seeing Sociologically: Marginality and Crisis

Anyone can learn to see the world using the sociological perspective. But two situations help people see clearly how society shapes individual lives: living on the margins of society and living through a social crisis.

From time to time, everyone feels like an outsider. For some categories of people, however, being an outsider—not part of the dominant group—is an everyday experience. The greater people’s social marginality, the better they are able to use the sociological perspective.

For example, no African American grows up in the United States without understanding the importance of race in shaping people’s lives. Songs by rapper Jay-Z express the anger he feels, not only about the poverty he experienced growing up but also about the many innocent lives lost to violence in a society with great social inequality based on race. His lyrics and those of many similar artists are spread throughout the world by the mass media as statements of how some people of color—especially African Americans living in the inner city—feel that their hopes and dreams are crushed by society. But white people, as the dominant...
majority, think less often about race, believing that race affects only people of color and not themselves despite the privileges provided by being white in a multiracial society. All people at the margins of social life, including not just racial minorities but also women, gay people, people with disabilities, and the very old, are aware of social patterns that others rarely think about. To become better at using the sociological perspective, we must step back from our familiar routines and look at our own lives with a new curiosity.

Periods of change or crisis make everyone feel a little off balance, encouraging us to use the sociological perspective. The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) illustrated this idea using the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the unemployment rate soared to 25 percent, people who were out of work could not help but see general social forces at work in their particular lives. Rather than saying, “Something must be wrong with me; I can’t find a job,” they took a sociological approach and realized, “The economy has collapsed; there are no jobs to be found!” Mills believed that using what he called the “sociological imagination” in this way helps people understand not only their society but also their own lives, because the two are closely related. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box on page 8 takes a closer look.

Just as social change encourages sociological thinking, sociological thinking can bring about social change. The more we learn about how “the system” operates, the more we may want to change it in some way. Becoming aware of the power of gender, for example, has caused many women and men to try to reduce gender inequality in our society.

The Importance of a Global Perspective

1.2 State several reasons that a global perspective is important in today’s world.

As new information technology draws even the farthest reaches of the planet closer together, many academic disciplines are taking a global perspective, the study of the larger world and our society’s place in it. What is the importance of a global perspective for sociology?

First, global awareness is a logical extension of the sociological perspective. Sociology shows us that our place in society shapes our life experiences. It stands to reason, then, that the position of our society in the larger world system affects everyone in the United States.

The world’s 194 nations can be divided into three broad categories according to their level of economic development (see Global Map 12–1). High-income countries are the nations with the highest overall standards of living. The seventy-six countries in this category include the United States and Canada, Argentina, the nations of Western Europe, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Australia. Taken together, these nations produce most of the world’s goods and services, and the people who live there own most of the planet’s wealth. Economically speaking, people in these countries are very well off, not because they are smarter or work harder than anyone else but because they were lucky enough to be born in a rich region of the world.

A second category is middle-income countries, nations with a standard of living about average for the world as a whole. People in any of these seventy nations—many of the countries of Eastern Europe, some of Africa, and almost all of Latin America and Asia—are as likely to live in rural villages as in cities and to walk or ride tractors, scooters, bicycles, or animals as to drive automobiles. On average, they receive eight years of schooling. Most middle-income countries also have considerable social inequality within their own borders, so that some people are extremely rich (members of the business elite in nations across North Africa, for example), but many more lack safe housing and adequate nutrition (people living in the shanty settlements that surround Lima, Peru, or Mumbai, India).
Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life

The Sociological Imagination: Turning Personal Problems into Public Issues

As Mike opened the envelope, he felt the tightness in his chest. The letter he dreaded was in his hands—his job was finished at the end of the day. After eleven years! Years in which he had worked hard, sure that he would move up in the company. All those hopes and dreams were now suddenly gone. Mike felt like a failure. Anger at himself—for not having worked even harder, for having wasted eleven years of his life in what had turned out to be a dead-end job—swelled up inside him.

But as he returned to his workstation to pack his things, Mike soon realized that he was not alone. Almost all his colleagues in the tech support group had received the same letter. Their jobs were moving to India, where the company was able to provide telephone tech support for less than half the cost of employing workers in California.

By the end of the weekend, Mike was sitting in the living room with a dozen other ex-employees. Comparing notes and sharing ideas, they now realized that they were simply a few of the victims of a massive outsourcing of jobs that is part of what analysts call the "globalization of the economy."

In good times and bad, the power of the sociological perspective lies in making sense of our individual lives. We see that many of our particular problems (and our successes, as well) are not unique to us but are the result of larger social trends. Half a century ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills pointed to the power of what he called the sociological imagination to help us understand everyday events. As he saw it, society—not people's personal failings—is the main cause of poverty and other social problems. By turning personal problems into public issues, the sociological imagination also is the key to bringing people together to create needed change.

In this excerpt, Mills (1959:3–5) explains the need for a sociological imagination:

> When society becomes industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

> Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change . . . . The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the society in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kind of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of men and society, of biography and history, of self and world . . . . What they need . . . is a quality of mind that will help them [see] what is going on in the world and . . . what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality . . . [that] may be called the sociological imagination.

What Do You Think?

1. As Mills sees it, how are personal troubles different from public issues? Explain this difference in terms of what happened to Mike in the story above.

2. Living in the United States, why do we often blame ourselves for the personal problems we face?

3. How can using the sociological imagination give us the power to change the world?

*In this excerpt, Mills uses "man" and male pronouns to apply to all people. As far as gender was concerned, even this outspoken critic of society reflected the conventional writing practices of his time.*

The remaining forty-eight nations of the world are low-income countries, nations with a low standard of living in which most people are poor. Most of the poorest countries in the world are in Africa, and a few are in Asia. Here again, a few people are very rich, but the majority struggle to get by with poor housing, unsafe water, too little food, and perhaps most serious of all, little chance to improve their lives.

Chapter 12 ("Global Stratification") explains the causes and consequences of global wealth and poverty. But every chapter of this text makes comparisons between the United States and other nations for five reasons:

1. Where we live shapes the lives we lead. As we saw in Global Map 1–1, women living in rich and poor countries have very different lives, as suggested by the number of children they
have. To understand ourselves and appreciate how others live, we must understand something about how countries differ, which is one good reason to pay attention to the global maps found throughout this text.

2. Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected. Historically, people in the United States took only passing note of the countries beyond our own borders. In recent decades, however, the United States and the rest of the world have become linked as never before. Electronic technology now transmits sounds, pictures, and written documents around the globe in seconds.

One effect of new technology is that people the world over now share many tastes in food, clothing, and music. Rich countries such as the United States influence other nations, whose people are ever more likely to gobble up our Big Macs and Whoppers, dance to the latest hip-hop music, and speak English.

But the larger world also has an impact on us. We all know the contributions of famous immigrants such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (who came to the United States from Austria) and Gloria Estefan (who came from Cuba). About 1.25 million immigrants enter the United States each year, bringing their skills and talents, along with their fashions and foods, greatly increasing the racial and cultural diversity of this country (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2012; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2014).

3. What happens in the rest of the world affects life here in the United States. Trade across national boundaries has created a global economy. Large corporations make and market goods worldwide. Stock traders in New York pay close attention to the financial markets in Tokyo and Hong Kong even as wheat farmers in Kansas watch the price of grain in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Because most new jobs in the United States involve international trade, global understanding has never been more important.

In the last several decades, the power and wealth of the United States have been challenged by what some analysts have called "the rise of the rest," meaning the increasing power and wealth of the rest of the world. As nations such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China have expanded their economic production, many of the manufacturing and office jobs that once supported a large share of the U.S. labor force have moved overseas. One consequence of this trend is that, as the country struggles to climb out of the recent recession, the unemployment rate remains high and may stay high for years to come. As many analysts see it, our current "jobless recovery" is one result of a new global economy that is reshaping societies all around the world (Zakeria, 2008).

4. Many social problems that we face in the United States are far more serious elsewhere. Poverty is a serious problem in the United States, but as Chapter 12 ("Global Stratification") explains, poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia is both more common and more serious. In the same way, although women have lower social standing than men in the United States, gender inequality is much greater in the world's poor countries.

5. Thinking globally helps us learn more about ourselves. We cannot walk the streets of a distant city without thinking about what it means to live in the United States. Comparing life in various settings also leads to unexpected lessons. For instance, were you to visit a squatter settlement in Chennai, India, you would likely find people thriving in the love and support of family members despite desperate poverty. Why, then, are so many poor people in our own country angry and alone? Are material things—so central to our definition of a "rich" life—the best way to measure human well-being?

In sum, in an increasingly interconnected world, we can understand ourselves only to the extent that we understand others. Sociology is an invitation to learn a new way of looking at the world around us. But is this invitation worth accepting? What are the benefits of applying the sociological perspective?

Applying the Sociological Perspective

1.3 Identify the advantages of sociological thinking for developing public policy, for encouraging personal growth, and for advancing in a career.

Applying the sociological perspective is useful in many ways. First, sociology is at work guiding many of the laws and policies that shape our lives. Second, on an individual level, making use of the sociological perspective leads to important personal growth and expanded awareness. Third, studying sociology is excellent preparation for the world of work.

Sociology and Public Policy

Sociologists have helped shape public policy—the laws and regulations that guide how people in communities live and work—in countless ways, from racial desegregation and school busing to laws regulating divorce. For example, in her study of how divorce affects people's income, the sociologist Lenore Weitzman (1985, 1996) discovered that women who leave marriages typically experience a dramatic loss of income. Recognizing this fact, many states passed laws that have increased women's claims to marital
property and enforced fathers’ obligations to provide support for women raising their children.

Sociology and Personal Growth

By applying the sociological perspective, we are likely to become more active and aware and to think more critically in our daily lives. Using sociology benefits us in four ways:

1. **The sociological perspective helps us assess the truth of “common sense.”** We all take many things for granted, but that does not make them true. One good example is the idea that we are free individuals who are personally responsible for our own lives. If we think we decide our own fate, we may be quick to praise very successful people as superior and consider others with fewer achievements personally deficient. A sociological approach, by contrast, encourages us to ask whether such common beliefs are actually true and, to the extent that they are not, why they are so widely held. The Thinking About Diversity box takes a look at low-wage jobs and explains how the sociological perspective sometimes makes us rethink common-sense ideas about other people and their work.

2. **The sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and constraints in our lives.** Sociological thinking leads us to see that in the game of life, society deals the cards. We have a say in how to play the hand, however, and the more we understand the game, the better players

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**Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, and Gender**

**Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America**

All of us know people who work at low-wage jobs as waitresses at diners, clerks at drive-throughs, or sales associates at discount stores such as Walmart. We see such people just about every day. Many of us actually are such people. In the United States, “common sense” tells us that the jobs people have and the amount of money they make reflect their personal abilities as well as their willingness to work hard.

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) had her doubts. To find out what the world of low-wage work is really like, the successful journalist and author decided to leave her comfortable middle-class life to live and work in the world of low-wage jobs. She began in Key West, Florida, taking a job as a waitress for $2.43 an hour plus tips. Right away, she found out that she had to work much harder than she ever imagined. By the end of a shift, she was exhausted, but after sharing tips with the kitchen staff, she averaged less than $6.00 an hour. This was barely above the minimum wage at the time and provided just enough income to pay the rent on her tiny apartment, buy food, and cover other basic expenses. She had to hope that she didn’t get sick, because the job did not provide health insurance and she couldn’t afford to pay for a visit to a doctor’s office.

After working for more than a year at a number of other low-wage jobs, including cleaning motels in Maine and working on the floor of a Walmart in Minnesota, she had rejected quite a bit of “common sense.” First, she now knew that tens of millions of people with low-wage jobs work very hard every day. If you don’t think so, Ehrenreich says, try one of these jobs yourself. Second, these jobs require not just hard work (imagine thoroughly cleaning three motel rooms per hour all day long) but also special skills and real intelligence (try waiting on ten tables in a restaurant at the same time and keeping everybody happy). She found that the people she worked with were, on average, just as smart, clever, and funny as those she knew who wrote books for a living or taught at a college.

Why, then, do we think of low-wage workers as lazy or as having less ability? It surprised Ehrenreich to learn that many low-wage workers felt this way about themselves. In a society that teaches us to believe personal ability is everything, we learn to size up people by their jobs. Subject to the constant supervision, random drug tests, and other rigid rules that usually come along with low-wage jobs, Ehrenreich imagined that many people end up feeling unworthy, even to the point of not trying for anything better. Such beliefs, she concludes, help support a society of extreme inequality in which some people live very well thanks to the low wages paid to the rest.

**What Do You Think?**

1. Have you ever held a low-wage job? If so, would you say you worked hard? What was your pay? Were there any benefits?

2. Ehrenreich claims that most well-off people in the United States are dependent on low-wage workers. What does she mean by this?

3. How much of a chance do most people with jobs at Wendy’s or Walmart have to enroll in college and to work toward a different career? Explain.
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we become. Sociology helps us learn more about the world so that we can pursue our goals more effectively.

3. The sociological perspective empowers us to be active participants in our society. The more we understand how society works, the more active citizens we become. As C. Wright Mills (1959) explained in the box, it is the sociological perspective that turns a personal problem (such as being out of work) into a public issue (a lack of good jobs). As we come to see how society affects us, we may support society as it is, or we may set out with others to change it.

4. The sociological perspective helps us live in a diverse world. North Americans represent just 5 percent of the world's people, and as the remaining chapters of this book explain, many of the other 95 percent live very differently than we do. Still, like people everywhere, we tend to define our own way of life as "right," "natural," and "better." The sociological perspective encourages us to think critically about the relative strengths and weaknesses of all ways of life, including our own.

Careers: The "Sociology Advantage"

Most students at colleges and universities today are very interested in getting a good job. A background in sociology is excellent preparation for the working world. Of course, completing a bachelor's degree in sociology is the right choice for people who decide they would like to go on to graduate work and eventually become a secondary school teacher, college professor, or researcher in this field. Throughout the United States, tens of thousands of men and women teach sociology in universities, colleges, and high schools. But just as many professional sociologists work as researchers for government agencies or private foundations and businesses, gathering important information on social behavior and carrying out evaluation research. In today's cost-conscious world, agencies and companies want to be sure that the programs and policies they set in place get the job done at the lowest cost. Sociologists, especially those with advanced research skills, are in high demand for this kind of work (Deutscher, 1999; American Sociological Association, 2015).

In addition, a smaller but increasing number of professional sociologists work as clinical sociologists. These women and men work, much as clinical psychologists do, with the goal of improving the lives of troubled clients. A basic difference is that sociologists focus on difficulties not in the personality but in the individual's web of social relationships.

But sociology is not just for people who want to be sociologists. People who work in criminal justice—in police departments, probation offices, and corrections facilities—gain the "sociology advantage" by learning which categories of people are most at risk of becoming criminals as well as victims, assessing the effectiveness of various policies and programs at preventing crime, and understanding why people turn to crime in the first place. Similarly, people who work in health care—including doctors, nurses, and technicians—also gain a sociology advantage by learning about patterns of health and illness within the population, as well as how factors such as race, gender, and social class affect human well-being.

The American Sociological Association (2002, 2011a, 2011b; 2015) reports that sociology is also excellent preparation for jobs in dozens of additional fields, including advertising, banking, business, education, government, journalism, law, public relations, and social work. In almost any type of work, success depends on understanding how various categories of people differ in beliefs, family patterns, and other ways of life. Unless you plan to have a job that never involves dealing with people, you should consider the workplace benefits of learning more about sociology.

VIDEO
Sociology on the Job: What Is Sociology? (4:55)
This short video explores the ways in which a background in sociology is excellent preparation for college graduates seeking careers in many diverse fields.

VOCABULARY FLASHCARDS
Key terms in module: Students can use the Flashcards to assess what they have learned. They have the ability to show/hide definitions or terms.

REVEL offers a 5-question end-of-module quiz, focused on sociology and public policy, sociology and personal growth, and the "sociology advantage," that allows students to practice their content mastery.

WRITE
Journal Prompt
Benefits of the Sociological Perspective
Point to several ways in which a better understanding of how society works would benefit you in both your working life and your personal life.
The Origins of Sociology

1.4 Link the origins of sociology to historical social changes.

Like the "choices" made by individuals, major historical events rarely just happen. The birth of sociology was itself the result of powerful social forces.

Social Change and Sociology

Striking changes took place in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Three kinds of change were especially important in the development of sociology: the rise of a factory-based industrial economy, the explosive growth of cities, and new ideas about democracy and political rights.

A NEW INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY During the Middle Ages in Europe, most people plowed fields near their homes or worked in small-scale manufacturing (a term derived from Latin words meaning "to make by hand"). By the end of the eighteenth century, inventors used new sources of energy—the power of moving water and then steam—to operate large machines in mills and factories. Instead of laboring at home or in small groups, workers became part of a large and anonymous labor force, under the control of strangers who owned the factories. This change in the system of production took people out of their homes, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.

THE GROWTH OF CITIES Across Europe, landowners took part in what historians call the enclosure movement—they fenced off more and more farmland to create grazing areas for sheep, the source of wool for the thriving textile mills.

Without land, countless tenant farmers had little choice but to head to the cities in search of work in the new factories.

As cities grew larger, these urban migrants faced many social problems, including pollution, crime, and homelessness. Moving through streets crowded with strangers, they faced a new and impersonal social world.

POLITICAL CHANGE Europeans in the Middle Ages viewed society as an expression of God's will: From the royalty to the serfs, each person up and down the social ladder played a part in the holy plan. This theological view of society is captured in lines from the old Anglican hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful":

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly  
And ordered their estate.

But as cities grew, tradition came under attack. In the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Adam Smith (1723–1790), we see a shift in focus from a moral obligation to God and king to the pursuit of self-interest. In the new political climate, philosophers spoke of personal liberty and individual rights. Echoing these sentiments, our own Declaration of Independence states that every person has "certain unalienable rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The French Revolution, which began in 1789, was an even greater break with political and social tradition. The French social analyst Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) thought the changes in society brought about by the French Revolution were so great that they amounted to "nothing short of the regeneration of the whole human race" (1955:13, orig. 1856).

A NEW AWARENESS OF SOCIETY Huge factories, exploding cities, a new spirit of individualism—these changes combined to make people more aware of their surroundings. The new discipline of sociology was born in England, France, and Germany—precisely where the changes were greatest.

Science and Sociology

And so it was that the French social thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term sociology in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society. This makes sociology one of the youngest academic disciplines—far newer than history, physics, or economics, for example.
Of course, Comte was not the first person to think about the nature of society. Such questions fascinated many of the brilliant thinkers of ancient civilizations, including the Chinese philosopher K'ung Fu-tzu, or Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), and the Greek philosophers Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.).¹ Over the next several centuries, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180), the medieval thinkers Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) and Christine de Pisan (c. 1363–1431), and the English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote about the workings of society.

Yet these thinkers were more interested in imagining the ideal society than in studying society as it really was. Comte and other pioneers of sociology all cared about how society could be improved, but their major objective was to understand how society actually operates.

Comte (1798–1857), saw sociology as the product of a three-stage historical development. During the earliest, the theological stage, from the beginning of human history to the end of the European Middle Ages about 1350 C.E., people took a religious view that society expressed God’s will.

With the dawn of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, the theological approach gave way to a metaphysical stage of history in which people saw society as a natural rather than a supernatural system. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for example, suggested that society reflected not the perfection of God so much as the failings of a selfish human nature.

What Comte called the scientific stage of history began with the work of early scientists such as the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473–1543), the Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo (1564–1642), and the English physicist and mathematician Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Comte’s contribution came in applying the scientific approach—first used to study the physical world—to the study of society.²

Comte’s approach is called positivism, a scientific approach to knowledge based on “positive” facts as opposed to mere speculation. As a positivist, Comte believed that society operates according to its own laws, much as the physical world operates according to gravity and other laws of nature.

¹ The abbreviation B.C. means “before the common era.” We use this throughout the text instead of the traditional B.C. (“before Christ”) to reflect the religious diversity of our society. Similarly, in place of the traditional A.D. (anno Domini, or “in the year of our Lord”), we use the abbreviation C.E. (“common era”).

² Illustrating Comte’s stages, the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the planets as gods; Renaissance metaphysical thinkers saw them as astral influences (giving rise to astrology); by the time of Galileo, scientists understood planets as natural objects moving according to natural laws.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, sociology had spread to the United States. The influence of Comte’s ideas. Today, most sociologists still consider science a crucial part of sociology. But as Chapter 2 (“Sociological Investigation”) explains, we now realize that human behavior is far more complex than the movement of planets or even the actions of other living things. We are creatures of imagination and spontaneity, so human behavior can never be fully explained by any rigid “laws of society.” In addition, early sociologists such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose ideas are discussed in Chapter 4 (“Society”), were troubled by the striking inequalities of industrial society. They hoped that the new discipline of sociology would not just help us understand society but also lead to change toward greater social justice.

Sociological Theory

1.5 Summarize sociology’s major theoretical approaches.

The desire to translate observations into understanding brings us to the important aspect of sociology known as theory. A theory is a statement of how and why specific facts are related. The job of sociological theory is to explain social behavior in the real world. For example, recall Emile Durkheim’s theory that categories of people with low social integration (men, Protestants, the wealthy, and the unmarried) are at higher risk of suicide.

As the next chapter (“Sociological Investigation”) explains, sociologists test their theories by gathering evidence using various research methods. Durkheim did exactly this, finding out which categories of people were more likely to commit suicide and which were less likely and then devising a theory that best squared with all available evidence. National Map 1–1 on page 14 displays the suicide rate for each of the fifty states.

In deciding which theory to use, sociologists face two basic questions: What issues should we study? And how should we connect the facts? In the process of answering these questions, sociologists look to one or more theoretical approaches as “road maps.” Think of a theoretical approach as a basic image of society that guides thinking and research. Sociologists make use of three major theoretical approaches: the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach, and the symbolic-interaction approach.
Seeing Ourselves

In the Plains and Mountain regions, and across the mountainous Appalachian region of the country, population density is very low, so people are more isolated. This isolation contributes to a higher rate of suicide.

### National Map 1–1 Suicide Rates across the United States

This map shows which states have high, average, and low suicide rates. Look for patterns. By and large, high suicide rates occur where people live far apart from one another. More densely populated states have low suicide rates. Do these data support or contradict Durkheim's theory of suicide? Why?

**SOURCE:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015).

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### The Structural-Functional Approach

The **structural-functional approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. As its name suggests, this approach points to **social structure**, any relatively stable pattern of social behavior. Social structure gives our lives shape—in families, the workplace, the classroom, and the community. This approach also looks for a structure's **social functions**, the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole. All social structures, from a simple handshake to complex religious rituals, function to keep society going, at least in its present form.

The structural-functional approach owes much to Auguste Comte, who pointed out the need to keep society unified at a time when many traditions were breaking down. Emile Durkheim, who helped establish the study of sociology in French universities, also based his work on this approach. A third structural-functional pioneer was the English sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Spencer compared society to the human body. Just as the structural parts of the human body—the skeleton, muscles, and various internal organs—function interdependently to help the entire organism survive, social structures work together to preserve society. The structural-functional approach, then, leads sociologists to identify various structures of society and investigate their functions.

Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) expanded our understanding of the concept of social function by pointing out that any social structure probably has many functions, some more obvious than others. He distinguished between **manifest functions**, the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern, and **latent functions**, the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern. For example, the manifest function of the U.S. system of higher education is to provide young people with the information and skills they need to perform jobs after graduation. Perhaps just as

- **social functions**, the consequences of a social pattern for the operation of society as a whole
- **manifest functions**, the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern
- **latent functions**, the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern
important, although less often acknowledged, is college’s latent function as a “marriage broker,” bringing together young people of similar social backgrounds. Another latent function of higher education is to limit unemployment by keeping millions of young people out of the labor market, where many of them might not easily find jobs.

But Merton also recognized that not all the effects of social structure are good. Thus a social dysfunction is any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society. Globalization of the economy may be good for some companies, but it also can cost workers their jobs as production moves overseas. Therefore, whether any social patterns are helpful or harmful for society is a matter about which people often disagree. In addition, what is functional for one category of people (say, high profits for Wall Street bank executives) may well be dysfunctional for other categories of people (workers who lose pension funds invested in banks that fail or people who cannot pay their mortgages and end up losing their homes).

**EVALUATE**

The main idea of the structural-functional approach is its vision of society as stable and orderly. The main goal of the sociologists who use this approach, then, is to figure out “what makes society tick.”

In the mid-1900s, most sociologists favored the structural-functional approach. In recent decades, however, its influence has declined. By focusing on social stability and unity, critics point out, structural-functionalism ignores inequalities of social class, race, and gender, which cause tension and conflict. In general, its focus on stability at the expense of conflict makes this approach somewhat conservative. As a critical response, sociologists developed the social-conflict approach.

**CHECK YOUR LEARNING** How do manifest functions differ from latent functions? Give an example of a manifest function and a latent function of automobiles in the United States.

The Social-Conflict Approach

The **social-conflict approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Unlike the structural-functional emphasis on solidarity and stability, this approach highlights inequality and change. Guided by this approach, which includes the gender-conflict and race-conflict approaches, sociologists investigate how factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and age are linked to a society’s unequal distribution of money, power, education, and social prestige. A conflict analysis rejects the idea that social structure promotes the operation of society as a whole, focusing instead on how social patterns benefit some people while hurting others.

Sociologists using the social-conflict approach look at ongoing conflict between dominant and disadvantaged categories of people—the rich in relation to the poor, white people in relation to people of color, and men in relation to women. Typically, people on top try to protect their privileges while the disadvantaged try to gain more for themselves.

A social-conflict analysis of our educational system shows how schooling carries class inequality from one generation to the next. For example, secondary schools assign students to either college preparatory or vocational training programs. From a structural-functional point of view, such “tracking” benefits everyone by providing schooling that fits students’ abilities. But social-conflict analysis argues that tracking often has less to do with talent than with social background, with the result that well-to-do students are placed in higher tracks while poor children end up in the lower tracks.

Thus young people from privileged families get the best schooling, which leads them to college and later to high-income careers. The children of poor families, by contrast, are not prepared for college and, like their parents before them, typically get stuck in low-paying jobs. In both cases, the social standing of one generation is passed on to the next, with schools justifying the practice in terms of individual merit (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1982, 1985; Brunello & Checchi, 2007).
The importance of gender-conflict theory lies in making us aware of the many ways in which our way of life places men in positions of power over women: in the home (where men are usually considered “head of the household”), in the workplace (where men earn more income and hold most positions of power), and in the mass media (where, for instance, more men than women are hip-hop stars).

Another contribution of feminist theory is making us aware of the importance of women to the development of sociology. Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) is regarded as the first woman sociologist. Born to a wealthy English family, Martineau made her mark in 1853 by translating the writings of Auguste Comte from French into English. In her own published writings, she documented the evils of slavery and argued for laws to protect factory workers, defending workers’ right to unionize. She was particularly concerned about the position of women in society and fought for changes in education policy so that women could have more options in life than marriage and raising children.

In the United States, Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a sociological pioneer whose contributions began in 1889 when she helped found Hull House, a Chicago settlement house that provided assistance to immigrant families. Although widely published—Addams wrote eleven books and hundreds of articles—she chose the life of a public activist over that of a university sociologist, speaking out on issues involving immigration and the pursuit of peace. Though her pacifism during World War I was the subject of much controversy, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

All chapters of this book consider the importance of gender and gender inequality. For an in-depth look at feminism and the social standing of women and men, see Chapter 13 (“Gender Stratification”).

**Race-Conflict Theory**

Another important type of social-conflict theory is race-conflict theory, the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories. Just as men have power over women, white people have numerous social advantages over people of color including, on average, higher incomes, more schooling, better health, and longer life expectancy. Race-conflict theory also points out the contributions made by people of color to the development of sociology. Ida Wells Barnett (1862–1931) was born to slave parents but rose to become a teacher and then a journalist.
and newspaper publisher. She campaigned tirelessly for racial equality and, especially, to put an end to the lynching of black people. She wrote and lectured about racial inequality throughout her life (Lengerman & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998).

An important contribution to understanding race in the United States was made by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). Born to a poor Massachusetts family, Du Bois (pronounced doo-boyss) enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and then at Harvard University, where he earned the first doctorate awarded by that university to a person of color. Du Bois then founded the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, which was an important center of sociological research in the early decades of the twentieth century. Like most people who follow the social-conflict approach (whether focusing on class, gender, or race), Du Bois believed that sociologists should not simply learn about society’s problems but also try to solve them. He therefore studied the black communities across the United States, pointing to numerous social problems ranging from educational inequality to a political system that denied people their right to vote and the terrorist practice of lynching. Du Bois spoke out against racial inequality and participated in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (E. Wright, 2002a, 2002b). The Thinking About Diversity box takes a closer look at the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois.

Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, and Gender

W. E. B. Du Bois: A Pioneer in Sociology

One of sociology’s pioneers in the United States, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois saw sociology as the key to solving society’s problems, especially racial inequality. Du Bois earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University and established the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, one of the first centers of sociological research in the United States. He helped his colleagues in sociology—and people everywhere—to see the deep racial divisions in the United States. White people could simply be “Americans,” Du Bois pointed out; African Americans, however, have a “double consciousness,” reflecting their status as people who are never able to escape identification based on the color of their skin.

In his sociological classic The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (1899), Du Bois explored Philadelphia’s African American community, identifying both the strengths and the weaknesses of people who were dealing with overwhelming social problems on a day-to-day basis. He challenged the belief—widespread at that time—that blacks were inferior to whites, and he blamed white prejudice for creating the problems that African Americans faced. He also criticized successful people of color for being so eager to win white acceptance that they gave up all ties with the black community that needed their help.

Despite notable achievements, Du Bois gradually grew impatient with academic study, which he felt was too detached from the everyday struggles experienced by people of color. Du Bois wanted change. It was the hope of sparking public action against racial separation that led Du Bois, in 1909, to participate in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that has been active in supporting racial equality for more than a century. As the editor of the organization’s magazine, Crisis, Du Bois worked tirelessly to challenge laws and social customs that deprived African Americans of the rights and opportunities enjoyed by the white majority.

Du Bois described race as the major problem facing the United States in the twentieth century. Early in his career, he was hopeful about overcoming racial divisions. By the end of his life, however, he had grown bitter, believing that little had changed. At the age of ninety-three, Du Bois left the United States for Ghana, where he died two years later.

What Do You Think?

1. If he were alive today, what do you think Du Bois would say about racial inequality in the twenty-first century?

2. How much do you think African Americans today experience a “double consciousness”?

3. In what ways can sociology help us understand and reduce racial conflict?

Sources: Based in part on Baltzell (1967), Du Bois (1967, orig. 1899), Wright (2002a, 2002b), and personal communication with Earl Wright II.
The Symbolic-Interaction Approach

The structural-functional and social-conflict approaches share a **macro-level orientation**, a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole. Macro-level sociology takes in the big picture, rather like observing a city from high above in a helicopter and seeing how highways help people move from place to place or how housing differs from rich to poor neighborhoods. Sociology also uses a **micro-level orientation**, a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations. Exploring urban life in this way occurs at street level, where you might watch how children invent games on a school playground or how pedestrians respond to homeless people they pass on the street. The **symbolic-interaction approach**, then, is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals.

How does “society” result from the ongoing experiences of tens of millions of people? One answer, explained in Chapter 6 (“Social Interaction in Everyday Life”), is that society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct for themselves as they interact with one another. Human beings live in a world of symbols, attaching meaning to virtually everything, from the words on a page to the wink of an eye. We create “reality,” therefore, as we define our surroundings, decide what we think of others, and shape our own identities.

The symbolic-interaction approach has roots in the thinking of Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist who emphasized the need to understand a setting from the point of view of the people in it. Weber’s approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (“Society”).

Since Weber’s time, sociologists have taken micro-level sociology in a number of directions. Chapter 5 (“Socialization”) discusses the ideas of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who explored how our personalities develop as a result of social experience. Chapter 6 (“Social Interaction in Everyday Life”) presents the work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982), whose dramaturgical analysis describes how we resemble actors on a stage as we play our various roles. Other contemporary sociologists, including George Homans and Peter Blau, have developed social-exchange analysis. In their view, social interaction is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction. In the ritual of courtship, for example, people seek mates who offer at least as much—in terms of physical attractiveness, intelligence, and social background—as they offer in return.
The Applying Theory table summarizes the main characteristics of sociology’s major theoretical approaches: the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach, feminism and the gender-conflict approach, the race-conflict approach, and the symbolic-interaction approach. Each of these approaches is helpful in answering particular kinds of questions about society. However, the fullest understanding of our social world comes from using all of them, as you can see in the following analysis of sports in the United States.

Applying the Approaches: The Sociology of Sports

Apply sociology’s major theoretical approaches to the topic of sports.

The Functions of Sports

A structural-functional approach directs our attention to the ways in which sports help society operate.

The manifest functions of sports include providing recreation as well as offering a means of getting in physical shape and a relatively harmless way to let off steam. Sports have important latent functions as well, which include building social relationships and also creating tens of thousands of jobs across the country. Participating in sports encourages competition and the pursuit of success, both of which are values that are central to our society’s way of life.

Sports also have dysfunctional consequences. For example, colleges and universities try to field winning teams to build a school’s reputation and also to raise money from alumni and corporate sponsors. In the process, however, these schools sometimes recruit students for their athletic skill rather than their academic ability. This practice not only lowers the academic standards of the college or university but also shortchanges athletes, who spend little time doing the academic work that will prepare them for later careers (Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999).

Sports and Conflict

A social-conflict analysis of sports points out that the games people play reflect their social standing. Some sports—including tennis, swimming, golf, sailing, and skiing—are expensive, so taking part is largely limited to the well-to-do. Football, baseball, and basketball, however, are accessible to people at almost all income levels. Thus the games people play are not simply a matter of individual choice but also a reflection of their social standing.

From a feminist point of view, we notice that throughout history men have dominated the world of sports. In
the nineteenth century, women had little opportunity to engage in athletic competition, and those who did received little attention (Shaulis, 1999; Feminist Majority Foundation, 2015). For example, the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896, barred women from competition. The 2016 Olympics, by contrast, will include women competing in twenty-eight sports, including boxing. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Little League teams barred girls based on the traditional ideas that girls and women lack the strength to play sports and risk losing their femininity if they do. Like the Olympics, Little League is now open to females as well as males. But even today, our society still encourages men to become athletes while expecting women to be attentive observers and cheerleaders. At the college level, men’s athletics attracts a greater amount of attention and resources compared to women’s athletics, and men greatly outnumber women as coaches, even in women’s sports (Welch & Sigelman, 2007). At the professional level, women also take a back seat to men, particularly in the sports with the most earning power and social prestige. In a listing of the world’s highest-paid athletes, the first woman (tennis star Maria Sharapova) appears thirty-fourth on the list (Forbes, 2015).

Race also figures in sports. For decades, big league sports excluded people of color, who were forced to form leagues of their own. Only in 1947 did Major League Baseball admit the first African American player when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. More than fifty years later, professional baseball honored Robinson’s amazing career by retiring his number 42 on all of the teams in the league. In 2013, African Americans (13 percent of the U.S. population) accounted for 9 percent of Major League Baseball players, 67 percent of National Football League (NFL) players, and 77 percent of National Basketball Association (NBA) players (Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, 2014).

One reason for the high number of African Americans in some professional sports is that athletic performance—in terms of batting average or number of points scored per game—can be precisely measured and is not influenced by racial prejudice. It is also true that some people of color make a particular effort to excel in athletics, where they see greater opportunity than in other careers (Steele, 1990; Edwards, 2000; Harrison, 2000). In recent years, in fact, African American athletes have earned higher salaries, on average, than white players. Forbes (2015) reports that five of the six highest-earning athletes are people who are racial or ethnic minorities.

But the race-conflict approach helps us to see that racial discrimination still exists in professional sports. For one thing, race is linked to the positions athletes play on the field, in a pattern called “stacking.” Figure 1–2 shows the results of a study of race in professional baseball. Notice that white athletes are more concentrated in the central “thinking” positions of pitcher (69 percent) and catcher (52 percent). By contrast, African Americans represent only 3 percent of pitchers and there are no black catchers at all. At the same time, 8 percent of infielders are African Americans, as are 25 percent of outfielders, positions characterized as requiring “speed and reactive ability” (Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, 2014).

More broadly, African Americans have a large share of players in only five sports: baseball, basketball, football, boxing, and track. In baseball, this share has been declining, from 19 percent in 1995 to 8.2 percent in 2013. And across all professional sports, the vast majority of managers, head coaches, and team owners are white (Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, 2014).

Who benefits most from professional sports? Although many individual players get sky-high salaries and millions of fans enjoy following their teams, the vast profits sports
generate are controlled by a small number of people—
predominantly white men. In sum, sports in the United
States are bound up with inequalities based on gender, race, 
and wealth.

Sports as Interaction

At the micro-level, a sporting event is a complex, face-
to-face interaction. In part, play is guided by the players’
assigned positions and the rules of the game. But players
are also spontaneous and unpredictable. Following
the symbolic-interaction approach, we see sports less as a
system and more as an ongoing process.

From this point of view, too, we expect each player
to understand the game a little differently. Some players
enjoy a setting of stiff competition; for others, love of the
game may be greater than the need to win.

In addition, the behavior of any single player may
change over time. A rookie in professional baseball, for ex-
ample, may feel self-conscious during the first few games
in the big leagues but go on to develop a comfortable sense
of fitting in with the team. Coming to feel at home on the
field was slow and painful for Jackie Robinson, who knew
that many white players, and millions of white fans, re-
sented his presence. In time, however, his outstanding
ability and his confident and cooperative manner won him
the respect of the entire nation.

The major theoretical approaches—the structural-
functional approach, the social-conflict approach, which
includes gender-conflict/feminist theory and race-conflict
theory, and the symbolic-interaction approach—provide
different insights into sports, and none by itself presents
the whole story. Applied to any issue, each approach
generates its own interpretations. To appreciate fully the
power of the sociological perspective, you should become
familiar with all these approaches.

The Controversy & Debate box on page 22 discusses
the use of the sociological perspective and reviews many
of the ideas presented in this chapter. This box raises a
number of questions that will help you understand how
sociological generalizations differ from the common
stereotypes we encounter every day.
Controversy & Debate

Is Sociology Nothing More Than Stereotypes?

**Jena:** (raising her eyes from her notebook) Today in sociology class, we talked about stereotypes.

**Marcia:** (trying to focus on her science lab) OK, here’s one: Roommates don’t like to be disturbed when they’re studying.

**Jena:** Seriously, my studious friend, we all have stereotypes, even professors.

**Marcia:** (becoming faintly interested) Like what?

**Jena:** Professor Chandler said today in class that if you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself. And then Yannina—this girl from, I think, Ecuador—says something like, “You Americans are rich, you marry, and you love to divorce!”

**Marcia:** My brother said to me last week that “everybody knows you have to be black to play professional basketball.” Now there’s a stereotype!

College students, like everyone else, are quick to make generalizations about people. And as this chapter has explained, sociologists, too, love to generalize by looking for social patterns. However, beginning students of sociology may wonder if generalizations aren’t really the same thing as stereotypes. For example, are the statements reported by Jena and Marcia true generalizations or false stereotypes?

Let’s first be clear that a **stereotype** is a simplified description applied to every person in some category. Each of the statements made at the beginning of this box is a stereotype that is false for three reasons. First, rather than describing averages, each statement describes every person in some category in exactly the same way; second, even though many stereotypes often contain an element of truth, each statement ignores facts and distorts reality; and third, each statement seems to be motivated by bias, sounding more like a “put-down” than a fair-minded observation.

What about sociology? If our discipline looks for social patterns and makes generalizations, does it express stereotypes? The answer is no, for three reasons. First, sociologists do not carelessly apply any generalization to everyone in a category. Second, sociologists make sure that a generalization squares with the available facts. And third, sociologists offer generalizations fair-mindedly, with an interest in getting at the truth.

Jena remembered her professor saying (although not in quite the same words) that the suicide rate among Protestants is higher than among Catholics or Jews. Based on information presented earlier in this chapter, that is a true statement. However, the way Jena incorrectly reported the classroom remark—“if you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself”—is not good sociology. It is not a true generalization because the vast majority of Protestants do no such thing. It would be just as wrong to jump to the conclusion that a particular friend, because he is a Protestant male, is about to end his own life. (Imagine refusing to lend money to a roommate who happens to be a Baptist, explaining, “Well, given the way people like you commit suicide, I might never get paid back!”)

Second, sociologists shape their generalizations to the available facts. A more factual version of the statement Yannina made in class is that, on average, the U.S. population does have a high standard of living, almost everyone in our society does marry at some point in life, and although few people take pleasure in divorcing, our divorce rate is also among the world’s highest.

Third, sociologists try to be fair-minded and want to get at the truth. The statement made by Marcia’s brother, about African Americans and basketball, is an unfair stereotype rather than good sociology for two reasons. First, although African Americans are overly represented in professional basketball relative to their share of the population, the statement—as made earlier—is simply not true; second, the comment seems motivated by bias rather than truth-seeking.

The bottom line is that good sociological generalizations are not the same as harmful stereotypes. A college sociology course is an excellent setting for getting at the truth behind common stereotypes. The classroom encourages discussion and offers the factual information you need to decide whether a particular statement is a valid sociological generalization or a harmful or unfair stereotype.

What Do You Think?

1. Can you think of a common stereotype of sociologists? What is it? After reading this box, do you still think it is valid?
2. Do you think taking a sociology course can help correct people’s stereotypes? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of a stereotype of your own that might be challenged by sociological analysis?
Why do couples marry?
We asked this question at the beginning of this chapter. The commonsense answer is that people marry because they are in love. But as this chapter has explained, society guides our everyday lives, and the power of society affects everything we do, think, and feel. Look at the three photographs, each showing a couple that, we can assume, is "in love." In each case, can you provide some of the rest of the story? By looking at the categories that the people involved represent, explain how society is at work in bringing the two people together.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles, widely known as Beyoncé, performs in New York's Madison Square Garden with her husband Jay-Z (Shawn Corey Carter). Looking at this couple, who married in 2008, what social patterns do you see?
In 2014, David Burtka and Neil Patrick Harris were married. They are raising two young children. Ten years ago, when this couple began dating, it is likely that few people imagined that same-sex marriage would become legal throughout the United States within a decade.

In 2013, eighty-six-year-old Hugh Hefner, founder of Playboy Enterprises, married twenty-six-year-old model Crystal Harris. What social patterns do you see in this relationship?

**Hint** Society is at work on many levels. Consider (1) rules about same-sex and other-sex marriage, (2) laws defining the categories of people whom one may marry, (3) the importance of race and ethnicity, (4) the importance of social class, (5) the importance of age, and (6) the importance of social exchange (what each partner offers the other). All societies enforce various rules that state who should or should not marry whom.

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**Seeing Sociology in Your Everyday Life**

1. Analyze the marriages of your parents, other family members, and friends in terms of class, race, age, and other factors. What evidence can you find that society guides the feelings that we call “love”?

2. As this chapter has explained, the time in human history when we are born and the society in which we are born, as well as our class position, race, and gender, all shape the personal experiences we have throughout our lives. Does this mean we have no power over our own destiny? No, in fact, the more we understand how society works, the more power we have to shape our own lives. For example, how has your deepened understanding of marriage, sports, or some other topic discussed in this chapter changed the way you think or the decisions you are likely to make?

3. Go to www.sociologyinfocus.com to access the Sociology in Focus blog, where you can read the latest posts by a team of young sociologists who apply the sociological perspective to topics of popular culture.
Making the Grade

CHAPTER 1 The Sociological Perspective

The Sociological Perspective

1.1 Explain how the sociological perspective differs from common sense. (pages 3–7)

The sociological perspective reveals the power of society to shape individual lives.

- What we commonly think of as personal choice—whether or not to go to college, how many children we will have, even the decision to end our own life—is affected by social forces.
- Peter Berger described the sociological perspective as “seeing the general in the particular.”
- C. Wright Mills called this point of view the “sociological imagination,” claiming it transforms personal troubles into public issues.
- The experience of being an outsider or of living through a social crisis can encourage people to use the sociological perspective.

global perspective the study of the larger world and our society's place in it
high-income countries nations with the highest overall standards of living
middle-income countries nations with a standard of living about average for the world as a whole
low-income countries nations with a low standard of living in which most people are poor

Applying the Sociological Perspective

1.3 Identify the advantages of sociological thinking for developing public policy, for encouraging personal growth, and for advancing in a career. (pages 9–11)

Research by sociologists plays an important role in shaping public policy.

On a personal level, using the sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and limits in our lives and empowers us to be active citizens.

A background in sociology is excellent preparation for success in many different careers.

The Origins of Sociology

1.4 Link the origins of sociology to historical social changes. (pages 12–13)

Rapid social change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made people more aware of their surroundings and helped trigger the development of sociology:

- The rise of an industrial economy moved work from homes to factories, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.
- The explosive growth of cities created many social problems, such as crime and homelessness.
- Political change based on ideas of individual liberty and individual rights encouraged people to question the structure of society.

Auguste Comte named sociology in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society.

- Early philosophers had tried to describe the ideal society.
- Comte wanted to understand society as it really is by using positivism, a way of understanding based on science.
- Karl Marx and many later sociologists used sociology to try to make society better.

positivism a scientific approach to knowledge based on "positive" facts as opposed to mere speculation

The Importance of a Global Perspective

1.2 State several reasons that a global perspective is important in today's world. (pages 7–9)

Where we live—in a high-income country like the United States, a middle-income country such as Brazil, or a low-income country such as Mali—shapes the lives we lead.

Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.

- New technology allows people around the world to share popular trends.
- Immigration from around the world increases the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States.
- Trade across national boundaries has created a global economy.

Many social problems that we face in the United States are far more serious in other countries. Learning about life in other societies helps us learn more about ourselves.

sociology the systematic study of human society
society people who live in a defined territory and share a way of life
sociological perspective sociology's special point of view that sees general patterns of society in the lives of particular people
Sociological Theory

1.5 Summarize sociology's major theoretical approaches. (pages 13–18)

A theory states how facts are related, weaving observations into insight and understanding. Sociologists use three major theoretical approaches to describe the operation of society.

- **Macro-level** The structural-functional approach explores how social structures—patterns of behavior, such as religious rituals or family life—work together to help society operate.
- Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Herbert Spencer helped develop the structural-functional approach.
- Thomas Merton pointed out that social structures have both manifest functions and latent functions; he also identified social dysfunctions as patterns that may disrupt the operation of society.

The social-conflict approach shows how inequality creates conflict and causes change.

- Karl Marx helped develop the social-conflict approach.
- **Gender-conflict theory**, also called feminist theory, focuses on ways in which society places men in positions of power over women. Harriet Martineau is regarded as the first woman sociologist.
- **Race-conflict theory** focuses on the advantages—including higher income, more schooling, and better health—that society gives to white people over people of color.
- W. E. B. Du Bois identified the “double consciousness” of African Americans.

**Macro-level** The symbolic-interaction approach studies how people, in everyday interaction, construct reality.

- Max Weber's claim that people's beliefs and values shape society is the basis of the social-interaction approach.
- Social-exchange analysis states that social life is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction.

Applying the Approaches: The Sociology of Sports

1.6 Apply sociology's major theoretical approaches to the topic of sports. (pages 19–22)

The Functions of Sports
The structural-functional approach looks at how sports help society function smoothly.

- Manifest functions of sports include providing recreation, a means of getting in physical shape, and a relatively harmless way to let off steam.
- Latent functions of sports include building social relationships and creating thousands of jobs.

Sports and Conflict
The social-conflict approach looks at the links between sports and social inequality.

- Historically, as feminism shows us, sports have benefited men more than women.
- Some sports are accessible mainly to affluent people.
- Race-conflict theory highlights the existence of racial discrimination in professional sports.

Sports as Interaction
The social-interaction approach looks at the different meanings and understandings people have of sports.

- Within a team, players affect each other's understanding of the sport.
- The reaction of the public can affect how players perceive their sport.

theory a statement of how and why specific facts are related
theoretical approach a basic image of society that guides thinking and research
structural-functional approach a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability
social structure any relatively stable pattern of social behavior
social functions the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole
manifest functions the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern
latent functions the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern
social dysfunction any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society
social-conflict approach a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change
gender-conflict theory (feminist theory) the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men
feminism support of social equality for women and men
race-conflict theory the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories
macro-level orientation a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole
micro-level orientation a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations
symbolic-interaction approach a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals

stereotype a simplified description applied to every person in some category
Chapter 2
Sociological Investigation

Learning Objectives

2.1 Explain how scientific evidence often challenges common sense.
2.2 Describe sociology’s three research orientations.
2.3 Identify the importance of gender and ethics in sociological research.
2.4 Explain why a researcher might choose each of sociology’s research methods.
The Power of Society
to influence our life chances

Do we simply "decide" our future? Among young men in their late twenties, part of the privilege of being white compared to being black is having double the odds of earning a college degree. Among African Americans, part of the disadvantage of being a person of color compared to being white is having six times the odds of being in jail or prison. While we all make choices, society sets the terrain of our life journey.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau (2014) and U.S. Department of Justice (2014).
Chapter Overview

Having learned to use the sociological perspective and how to make use of sociological theory, it is time to learn how sociologists "do" research. This chapter explains the process of sociological investigation or how sociologists gather knowledge about the world. First, the chapter looks at science as a way of knowing and then discusses two limitations to scientific sociology that have given rise to two other approaches to knowing—interpretive sociology and critical sociology. Second, the chapter explains and illustrates four methods of data collection.

While on a visit to Atlanta during the winter holiday season, the sociologist Lois Benjamin (1991) called up the mother of an old college friend. Benjamin was eager to learn about Sheba; both women had dreamed about earning a graduate degree, landing a teaching job, and writing books. Now a successful university professor, Benjamin had seen her dream come true. But as she soon found out, this was not the case with Sheba.

Benjamin recalled early signs of trouble. After college, Sheba had begun graduate work at a Canadian university. But in letters to Benjamin, Sheba became more and more critical of the world and seemed to be cutting herself off from others. Some classmates wondered if she was suffering from a personality disorder. But as Sheba saw it, the problem was racism. As an African American woman, she felt she was the target of racial hostility. Before long, she flunked out of school, blaming the failure on her white professors. At this point, she left North America, earning a Ph.D. in England and then settling in Nigeria. Benjamin had not heard from her friend in the years since.

Benjamin was happy to hear that Sheba had returned to Atlanta. But her delight dissolved into shock when she saw Sheba and realized that her friend had suffered a mental breakdown and was barely responsive to anyone.

For months, Sheba's emotional collapse troubled Benjamin. Obviously, Sheba was suffering from serious psychological problems. Having felt the sting of racism herself, Benjamin wondered if this might have played a part in Sheba's story. Partly as a tribute to her old friend, Benjamin set out to explore the effects of race in the lives of bright, well-educated African Americans in the United States.

Benjamin knew she was calling into question the common belief that race is less of a barrier than it used to be, especially to talented African Americans (Wilson, 1978). But her own experiences—and Sheba's too, she believed—seemed to contradict such thinking.

To test her ideas, Benjamin spent the next two years asking 100 successful African Americans across the country how race affected their lives. In the words of these "Talented One Hundred" men and women, she found evidence that even among privileged African Americans, racism remains a heavy burden.

Later in this chapter, we will take a closer look at Lois Benjamin's research. For now, notice how the sociological perspective helped her spot broad social patterns in the lives of individuals. Just as important, Benjamin's work shows us the doing of sociology, the process of sociological investigation.

Many people imagine that scientists work only in laboratories, using complex equipment and carefully taking measurements. But as this chapter explains, although some sociologists do conduct scientific research in laboratories,

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1 W. E. B. Du Bois used “The Talented Tenth” to refer to African American leaders.
Basics of Sociological Investigation

2.1 Explain how scientific evidence often challenges common sense.

Sociological investigation starts with two simple requirements. The first was the focus of Chapter 1: **Apply the sociological perspective.** This point of view reveals curious patterns of behavior all around us that call for further study. It was Lois Benjamin's sociological imagination that prompted her to wonder how race affects the lives of talented African Americans.

This brings us to the second requirement: **Be curious and ask questions.** Benjamin wanted to learn more about how race affects people who are high achievers. She began by asking questions: Who are the leaders of this nation's black community? What effect does being part of a racial minority have on their view of themselves? On the way white people perceive them and their work?

Seeing the world sociologically and asking questions are basic to sociological investigation. As we look for answers, we need to realize that there are various kinds of "truth."

Science as One Type of Truth

Saying that we "know" something can mean many things. Most people in the United States, for instance, say they believe in God. Few claim to have direct contact with God, but they say they believe all the same. We call this kind of knowing "belief" or "faith."

A second kind of truth comes from recognized experts. Students with a health problem, for example, may consult a campus physician or search the Internet for articles written by experts in the field.

A third type of truth is based on simple agreement among ordinary people. Most of us in the United States would probably say we "know" that sexual intercourse among ten-year-old children is wrong. But why? Mostly because just about everyone we know says it is.

People's "truths" differ the world over, and we often encounter "facts" at odds with our own sense of truth. Imagine yourself a Peace Corps volunteer just arrived in a small, traditional village in Latin America. Your job is to help local people grow more crops. On your first day in the fields, you observe a strange practice: After planting seeds, the farmers lay a dead fish on top of the soil. When you ask about this, they explain that the fish is a gift to the god of the harvest. A village elder adds sternly that the harvest was poor one year when no fish were offered.

From that society's point of view, using fish as gifts to the harvest god makes sense. The people believe in it, their experts endorse it, and everyone seems to agree that the system works. But with scientific training in agriculture, you have to shake your head and wonder. The scientific "truth" in this situation is something entirely different: The decomposing fish fertilize the ground, producing a better crop.

Science represents a fourth way of knowing. **Science is a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation.** Standing apart from faith, the wisdom of "experts," and general agreement, scientific knowledge rests on **empirical evidence**, that is, information we can verify with our senses.

Our Peace Corps example does not mean that people in traditional villages ignore what their senses tell them or that members of technologically advanced societies use only science to know things. A medical researcher using science to develop a new drug for treating cancer, for example, may still practice her religion as a matter of faith, turn to financial experts when making decisions about money, and pay attention to the political opinions of her family and friends. In short, we all hold various kinds of truths at the same time.

Common Sense versus Scientific Evidence

Like the sociological perspective, scientific evidence sometimes challenges our common sense. Here
are six statements that many North Americans assume are true:

1. “Poor people are far more likely than rich people to break the law.” Not true. If you regularly watch television shows like COPS, you might think that police arrest only people from “bad” neighborhoods. Chapter 9 (“Deviance”) explains that poor people do stand out in the official arrest statistics. But research also shows that police and prosecutors are more likely to treat well-to-do people more leniently, as when a Hollywood celebrity is accused of shoplifting or drunk driving. Some laws are even written in a way that criminalizes poor people more and affluent people less.

2. “The United States is a middle-class society in which most people are more or less equal.” False. Data presented in Chapter 11 (“Social Class in the United States”) show that the richest 5 percent of U.S. families control about 65 percent of the nation’s total wealth, but almost half of all families have scarcely any wealth at all. The gap between the richest people and average people in the United States has never been greater (Wolff, 2014).

3. “Most poor people don’t want to work.” Wrong. Research described in Chapter 11 indicates that this statement is true of some but not most poor people. In fact, more than four in ten poor individuals in the United States are children and elderly people who are not expected to work.

4. “Differences in the behavior of females and males are just ‘human nature.’” Wrong again. Much of what we call “human nature” is constructed by the society in which we live, as Chapter 3 (“Culture”) explains. Further, as Chapter 13 (“Gender Stratification”) argues, some societies define “feminine” and “masculine” very differently from the way we do.

5. “People change as they grow old, losing many interests as they focus on their health.” Not really. Chapter 15 (“Aging and the Elderly”) reports that aging does very little to change our personalities. Problems of health do increase in old age, but by and large, elderly people keep the distinctive personalities they have had throughout their adult lives.

6. “Most people marry because they are in love.” Not always. To members of our society, few statements are so obvious. Surprisingly, however, in many societies, marriage has little to do with love. Chapter 18 (“Families”) explains why.

These examples confirm the old saying that “it’s not what we don’t know that gets us into trouble as much as the things we do know that just aren’t so.” While growing up we have all heard many widely accepted “truths,” been bombarded by “expert” advice in the popular media, and felt pressure to accept the opinions of people around us. As adults, we need to evaluate more critically what we see, read, and hear. Sociology can help us do that.

## Three Ways to Do Sociology

### 2.2 Describe sociology’s three research orientations.

“Doing” sociology means learning about the social world. There is more than one way to do this. Just as sociologists can use one or more theoretical approaches (described in Chapter 1, “The Sociological Perspective”), they may also use different research orientations. The following sections describe three ways to do research: positivist sociology, interpretive sociology, and critical sociology.

### Positivist Sociology

Chapter 1 explained how early sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim applied science to the study of society just as natural scientists investigate the physical world. **Positivist sociology**, then, is the study of society based on systematic observation of social behavior. A positivist orientation to the world assumes that an objective reality exists “out there.” The job of the scientist is to discover this reality by gathering empirical evidence, facts we can verify with our senses, say, by seeing, hearing, or touching.

**CONCEPTS, VARIABLES, AND MEASUREMENT** Let’s take a closer look at how science works. A basic element of science is the **concept**, a mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form. Sociologists use concepts to label aspects of social life, including “the family” and “the economy,” and to categorize people in terms of their “gender” or “social class.”

A **variable** is a concept whose value changes from case to case. The familiar variable “price,” for example, has a value that changes from item to item in a supermarket. Similarly, we use the concept “social class” to describe people’s social standing as “upper class,” “middle class,” “working class,” or “lower class.”

The use of variables depends on **measurement**, a procedure for determining the value of a variable in a specific case. Some variables are easy to measure, as when you step on a
scale to see how much you weigh. But measuring sociological variables can be far more difficult. For example, how would you measure a person's social class? You might start by looking at the clothing people wear, listening to how they speak, or noting where they live. Or trying to be more precise, you might ask about their income, occupation, and education.

Because most variables can be measured in more than one way, sociologists often have to decide which factors to consider. For example, having a very high income might qualify a person as “upper class.” But what if the income comes from selling automobiles, an occupation most people think of as “middle class”? Would having only an eighth-grade education make the person “lower class”? In a case like this, sociologists usually combine these three measures—income, occupation, and education—to determine social class, as described in Chapter 10 (“Social Stratification”) and Chapter 11 (“Social Class in the United States”).

Sociologists also face the problem of dealing with huge numbers of people. For example, how do you report income for thousands or even millions of U.S. families? Listing streams of numbers would carry little meaning and tells us nothing about the population as a whole. To solve this problem, sociologists use descriptive statistics to state what is “average” for a large number of people. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box explains how.

Defining Concepts Measurement is always somewhat arbitrary because the value of any variable in part depends on how it is defined. In addition, it is easy to see that there is more than one way to measure abstract concepts such as “love,” “family,” or “intelligence.”

Good research therefore requires that sociologists operationalize a variable by specifying exactly what is to be measured before assigning a value to a variable. Before measuring the concept of “social class,” for example, you would have to decide exactly what you were going to measure—say, income level, years of school, or occupational prestige. Sometimes sociologists measure several of these

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### Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life

### Three Useful (and Simple) Descriptive Statistics

The admissions office at your school is preparing a new brochure, and as part of your work-study job in that office, your supervisor asks you to determine the average salary received by last year’s graduating class. To keep matters simple, assume that you talk to only seven members of the class (a real study would require contacting many more) and gather the following data on their present incomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$30,000</th>
<th>$42,000</th>
<th>$22,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$165,000</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$34,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sociologists use three different descriptive statistics to report averages. The simplest statistic is the mode, the value that occurs most often in a series of numbers. In this example, the mode is $22,000, since that value occurs two times and each of the others occurs only once. If all the values were to occur only once, there would be no mode; if two different values each occurred two or three times, there would be two modes. Although it is easy to identify, sociologists rarely use the mode because it reflects only some of the numbers and is therefore a crude measure of the “average.”

A more common statistic, the mean, refers to the arithmetic average of a series of numbers, calculated by adding all the values together and dividing by the number of cases. The sum of the seven incomes is $350,000. Dividing by 7 yields a mean income of $50,000. But notice that the mean in this case is not a very good “average” because it is higher than six of the seven incomes and is not particularly close to any of the actual numbers. Because the mean is “pulled” up or down by an especially high or low value (in this case, the $165,000 paid to one graduate, an athlete who signed as a rookie with the Cincinnati Reds farm team), it can give a distorted picture of data that include one or more extreme scores.

The median is the middle case, the value that occurs midway in a series of numbers arranged from lowest to highest. Here the median income for the seven graduates is $34,000, because when the numbers are placed in order from lowest to highest, this value occurs exactly in the middle, with three incomes higher and three lower. (With an even number of cases, the median is halfway between the two middle cases.) Unlike the mean, the median is not affected by any extreme scores. In such cases, the median gives a better picture of what is “average” than the mean.

### What Do You Think?

1. Your grade point average (GPA) is an example of an average. Is it a mode, a median, or a mean? Explain.
2. Sociologists generally use the median instead of the mean when they study people’s incomes. Can you see why?
3. Do a quick calculation of the mean, median, and mode for these simple numbers: 1, 2, 5, 6, 6.
things; in such cases, they need to specify exactly how they plan to combine these variables into one overall score. The next time you read the results of a study, notice the way the researchers operationalize each variable. How they define terms can greatly affect the results.

Even the researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau sometimes struggle with operationalizing a concept. Take the case of measuring the racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population. Back in 1977, researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau defined race and ethnicity by asking people to make a choice from this list: white, black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native. One problem with this system is that someone can be both Hispanic and white or black; similarly, people of Arab ancestry might not identify with any of these choices. Just as important, an increasing number of people in the United States are multiracial. In response to the changing face of the U.S. population, the 2000 census was the first one to allow people to describe their race and ethnicity by selecting more than one category from an expanded menu of choices and almost 7 million people did so. But many of these people selected both “Hispanic” and also a nationality, such as “Mexican.” The result was an overcount of the number of multiracial people. In 2010, census researchers adjusted the process, providing clearer instructions and operationalizing the concept of “race” by offering five racial categories, “some other race,” and fifty-seven multiracial options. In 2010, 9 million people identified themselves as “multiracial.” By 2013, this figure had increased to about 9.4 million people (about 3 percent of the population).

Reliability and Validity For a measurement to be useful, it must be both reliable and valid. Reliability refers to consistency in measurement. A measurement is reliable if repeated measurements give the same result time after time. But consistency does not guarantee validity, which means actually measuring exactly what you intend to measure.

Getting a valid measurement is sometimes tricky. For instance, say you want to know just how religious the students at your college are. You might decide to ask students how often they attend religious services. But is going to a church, temple, or mosque really the same thing as being religious? People may attend religious services because of deep personal beliefs, but they may also do so out of habit or because others pressure them to go. And what about spiritual people who avoid organized religion altogether? Even when a measurement yields consistent results (making it reliable), it may not measure what we want it to (therefore lacking validity). Chapter 19 (“Religion”) suggests that measuring religiosity should take account of not only participation in prayer services but also the beliefs a person holds and the degree to which a person lives by religious convictions. Good sociological research depends on careful measurement, which is always a challenge to researchers.

Relationships among Variables Once measurements are made, investigators can pursue the real payoff: seeing how variables are related. The scientific ideal is cause and effect, a relationship in which change in one variable causes change in another. Cause-and-effect relationships occur around us every day, as when studying hard for an exam results in a high grade. The variable that causes the change (in this case, how much you study) is called the independent variable. The variable that changes (the exam grade) is called the dependent variable. The value of one variable depends on the value of another. Linking variables in terms of cause and effect is important because it allows us to predict the outcome of future events—if we know one thing, we can accurately predict another. For example, knowing that studying hard results in a better exam grade, we can predict with confidence that a typical individual who studies hard for the next exam will receive a higher grade than if that person does not study at all.

But just because two variables change together does not mean that they are linked by a cause-and-effect relationship. For example, sociologists have long observed that juvenile delinquency is more common among young people who live in crowded housing. Say we operationalize the variable “juvenile delinquency” as the number of times a person under the age of eighteen has been arrested, and we define “crowded housing” by a home’s number of square feet of living space per person. It turns out that these variables are related: Delinquency rates are high in densely populated neighborhoods. But should we conclude that crowding in the home (in this case, the independent variable) is what causes delinquency (the dependent variable)?
more likely to end up with police records. In reality, crowded housing and juvenile delinquency are found together because both are caused by a third factor—poverty—as shown in part (b) of Figure 2–1. In short, the apparent connection between crowding and delinquency is “explained away” by a third variable—low income—that causes them both to change. So our original connection turns out to be a **spurious correlation**, an apparent but false relationship between two (or more) variables that is caused by some other variable.

Exposing a correlation as spurious requires a bit of detective work, assisted by a technique called control, holding constant all variables except one in order to see clearly the effect of that variable. In our example, we suspect that income level may be causing a spurious link between housing density and delinquency. To check whether the correlation between delinquency and crowding is spurious, we control for income—that is, we hold income constant by looking at only young people of one income level. If the correlation between density and delinquency remains, that is, if young people of the same income level living in more crowded housing show higher rates of arrest than young people in less crowded housing, we have more reason to think that crowding does, in fact, cause delinquency. But if the relationship disappears when we control for income, as shown in part (c) of Figure 2–1, then we know we were dealing with a spurious correlation. In fact, research shows that the correlation between crowding and delinquency just about disappears if income is controlled (Fischer, 1984). So we have now sorted out the relationship among the three variables, as illustrated in part (d) of the figure. Housing density and juvenile delinquency have a spurious correlation; evidence shows that both variables rise or fall according to income.

To sum up, correlation means only that two (or more) variables change together. To establish cause and effect, three requirements must be met: (1) a demonstrated correlation, (2) an independent (causal) variable that occurs before the dependent variable, and (3) no evidence that a third variable could be causing a spurious correlation between the two.

Natural scientists usually have an easier time than social scientists in identifying cause-and-effect relationships because most natural scientists work in laboratories, where they can control other variables. Carrying out research in a workplace or on the streets, however, makes control very difficult, so sociologists often have to settle for demonstrating only correlation. Also, human behavior is highly complex, involving dozens of causal variables at any one time, so establishing all the cause-and-effect relationships in any situation is extremely difficult.
THE IDEAL OF OBJECTIVITY  Ten students are sitting around a dorm lounge discussing the dream vacation spot for the upcoming spring break. Do you think one place will end up being everyone’s clear favorite? That hardly seems likely.

In scientific terms, each of the ten people probably operationalizes the concept “dream vacation” differently. For one, it might be a deserted, sunny beach in Mexico; for another, the choice might be New Orleans, a lively city with a very active social scene; for still another, hiking the Rocky Mountains below snow-capped peaks may be the choice. Like so many other “bests” in life, the best vacations turn out to be mostly a matter of individual taste.

Personal values are fine when it comes to choosing travel destinations, but they pose a challenge to scientific research. Remember, science assumes that reality is “out there.” Scientists need to study this reality without changing it in any way, and so they strive for objectivity, personal neutrality in conducting research. Objectivity means that researchers carefully hold to scientific procedures and do not let their own attitudes and beliefs influence the results.

Scientific objectivity is an ideal rather than a reality, of course, because no one can be completely neutral. Even the topic someone chooses to study reflects a personal interest of one sort or another, as Lois Benjamin showed us in the reasons for her decision to investigate race. But the scientific ideal is to keep a professional distance or sense of detachment from the results, however they turn out. With this ideal in mind, you should do your best when conducting research to see that conscious or unconscious biases do not distort your findings. As an extra precaution, many researchers openly state their personal leanings in their research reports so that readers can interpret the conclusions with those considerations in mind.

The German sociologist Max Weber expected that people would select their research topics according to their personal beliefs and interests. Why else, after all, would one person study world hunger, another investigate the effects of racism, and still another examine how children manage in one-parent families? Knowing that people select topics that are value-relevant, Weber urged researchers to be value-free in their investigations. Only by controlling their personal feelings and opinions (as we expect any professionals to do) can researchers study the world as it is rather than tell us how they think it should be. This detachment, for Weber, is a crucial element of science that sets it apart from politics. Politicians are committed to particular outcomes; scientists try to maintain an open mind about the results of their investigations, whatever they may turn out to be.

Weber’s argument still carries much weight, although most sociologists admit that we can never be completely value-free or even aware of all our biases. Keep in mind, however, that sociologists are not “average” people: Most are white, highly educated, and much more politically liberal than the population as a whole (Klein & Stern, 2004; Cardiff & Klein, 2005). Remember that sociologists, like everyone else, are influenced by their social backgrounds.

One way to limit distortion caused by personal values is replication, repetition of research by other investigators. If other researchers repeat a study using the same procedures and obtain the same results, we gain confidence that the results are accurate (both reliable and valid). The need for replication in scientific investigation probably explains why the search for knowledge is called “re-search” in the first place.

One principle of scientific research is that sociologists and other investigators should try to be objective in their work, so that their personal values and beliefs do not distort their findings. But such a detached attitude may discourage the connection needed for people to open up and share information. Thus sociologists have to decide how much to pursue objectivity and how much to show their own feelings.
Keep in mind that following the logic of science does not guarantee objective, absolute truth. What science offers is an approach to knowledge that is self-correcting so that in the long run, researchers stand a good chance of limiting their biases. Objectivity and truth lie, then, not in any one study but in the scientific process itself as it continues over time.

**SOME LIMITATIONS OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIOLOGY**

Science is one important way of knowing. Yet, applied to social life, science has several important limitations.

1. **Human behavior is too complex for sociologists to predict any individual’s actions precisely.** Astronomers calculate the movement of objects in the skies with remarkable precision, but comets and planets are nonthinking objects. Humans, by contrast, have minds of their own, so no two people react to any event (whether it be a sports victory or a natural disaster) in exactly the same way. Sociologists must therefore be satisfied with showing that categories of people typically act in one way or another. This is not a failing of sociology. It simply reflects the fact that we study creative, spontaneous people.

2. **Because humans respond to their surroundings, the presence of a researcher may affect the behavior being studied.** An astronomer’s gaze has no effect on a distant comet. But most people react to being observed. Try staring at someone for a few minutes and see for yourself. People being watched may become anxious, angry, or defensive; others may be especially friendly or helpful. The act of studying people can cause their behavior to change.

3. **Social patterns vary; what is true in one time or place may not hold true in another.** The same laws of physics will apply tomorrow as today, and they hold true all around the world. But human behavior is so variable that there are no universal sociological laws.

4. **Because sociologists are part of the social world they study, they can never be 100 percent value-free when conducting social research.** Barring a laboratory mishap, chemists are rarely personally affected by what goes on in their test tubes. But sociologists live in their “test tube,” the society they study. Therefore, social scientists may find it difficult to control—or even to recognize—personal values that may distort their work.

**Interpretive Sociology**

Not all sociologists agree that science is the only way—or even the best way—to study human society. This is because, unlike planets or other elements of the natural world, humans do not simply move around as objects in ways that can be measured. Even more important, people are active creatures who attach meaning to their behavior, and meaning is not easy to observe directly.

Therefore, sociologists have developed a second research orientation, known as interpretive sociology, the study of society that focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world. Max Weber, the pioneer of this framework, argued that the proper focus of sociology is interpretation, or understanding the meaning that people create in their everyday lives.
THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANING

Interprettive sociology does not reject science completely, but it does change the focus of research. Interpretive sociology differs from positivist sociology in four ways. First, positivist sociology focuses on actions—on what people do—because that is what we can observe directly. Interpretive sociology, by contrast, focuses on people's understanding of their actions and their surroundings. Second, positivist sociology claims that objective reality exists "out there," but interpretive sociology counters that reality is subjective, constructed by people in the course of their everyday lives. Third, positivist sociology tends to favor quantitative data—numerical measurements of people's behavior—while interpretive sociology favors qualitative data, or researchers' perceptions of how people understand their world. Fourth, the positivist orientation is best suited to research in a laboratory, where investigators conducting an experiment stand back and take careful measurements. On the other hand, the interpretive orientation claims that we learn more by interacting with people, focusing on subjective meaning, and learning how they make sense of their everyday lives. As the chapter will explain, this type of research often uses personal interviews or fieldwork and is best carried out in a natural or everyday setting.

WEBER'S CONCEPT OF VERSTEHEN Max Weber believed the key to interpretive sociology lay in Verstehen (pronounced "fair-SHTAY-in"), the German word for "understanding." The interpretive sociologist does not just observe what people do but also tries to understand why they do it. The thoughts and feelings of subjects, which scientists tend to dismiss because they are difficult to measure, are the focus of the interpretive sociologist's attention.

Interpretive sociology does not reject the practice of observing behavior or even the use of numerical measures. Many sociologists combine a positivist focus on observing behavior patterns with an interpretive effort to study how people understand their behavior and their social world.

Critical Sociology

Like the interpretive orientation, critical sociology developed in reaction to what many sociologists saw as the limitations of positivist sociology. In this case, however, the problem involves the central principle of scientific research: objectivity.

Positivist sociology holds that reality is "out there" and the researcher's task is to study and document how society works. But Karl Marx, who founded the critical orientation, rejected the idea that society exists as a "natural" system with a fixed order. To assume that society is somehow "fixed," he claimed, is the same as saying that society cannot be changed. Positivist sociology, from this point of view, supports the status quo. Critical sociology, by contrast, is the study of society that focuses on the need for social change.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANGE

Rather than asking the scientific question "How does society work?" critical sociologists ask moral and political questions, such as "Should society exist in its present form?" and "Why can't our society have less inequality?" Their answers to these questions, typically, are that society should not remain as it is and that we should try to make our world more socially equal. Critical sociology does not reject science completely—Marx (like critical sociologists today) used the scientific method to learn about inequality. But critical sociology does reject the positivist claim that researchers should try to be "objective" and limit their work to studying the status quo.

One recent account of this orientation, echoing Marx, claims that the point of sociology is "not just to research the social world but to change it in the direction of democracy and social justice" (Feagin & Hernán, 2001:1). In making value judgments about how society should be improved, critical sociology rejects Weber's goal that researchers be value-free and emphasizes instead that they should be social activists in pursuit of greater social equality.

Sociologists using the critical orientation seek to change not just society but also the character of research itself. They often identify personally with their research subjects and encourage them to help decide what to study and how to do the work. Typically, researchers and subjects use their findings to provide a voice for less powerful people and to advance the political goal of a more equal society (Feagin & Hernán, 2001; Perrucci, 2001).

SOCIOLOGY AS POLITICS

Positivist sociologists object to taking sides in this way, charging that to the extent that critical sociology (whether feminist, Marxist, or of some other critical orientation) becomes political, it lacks objectivity and it cannot correct for its own biases. Critical
sociologists reply that all research is political or biased—either it calls for change or it does not; sociologists thus have no choice about their work being political, but they can choose which positions to support.

Critical sociology is an activist orientation that ties knowledge to action and seeks not just to understand the world as it exists but also to improve it. Researchers using a critical approach often take a positivist interest in measuring some social patterns such as income inequality. But the motivation for their research is to bring about some change, typically change toward a society with greater equality. In general terms, then, positivist sociology appeals to researchers with nonpolitical or more conservative political views; critical sociology appeals to those whose politics range from liberal to radical left.

Research Orientations and Theory

Is there a link between research orientations and sociological theory? There is no precise connection, but each of the three research orientations—positivist, interpretive, and critical—does stand closer to one of the theoretical approaches presented in Chapter 1 ("The Sociological Perspective"). The positivist orientation has an important factor in common with the structural-functional approach—both are concerned with understanding society as it is. In the same way, interpretive sociology has in common with the symbolic-interaction approach a focus on the meanings people attach to their social world. Finally, critical sociology has in common with the social-conflict approach the fact that both seek to reduce social inequality. The Summing Up table provides a quick review of the differences among the three research orientations. Many sociologists favor one orientation over another; however, because each provides useful insights, it is a good idea to become familiar with all three (Gamson, 1999).

### Issues Affecting Sociological Research

#### 2.3 Identify the importance of gender and ethics in sociological research.

Both gender and ethics play important parts in sociological investigation. We deal with these factors in turn.

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### Gender

Sociologists also know that research is affected by gender, the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male. Margrit Eichler 1988 identifies five ways in which gender can shape research:

1. **Androcentricity.** Androcentricity (literally, "focus on the male") refers to approaching an issue from a male perspective. Sometimes researchers act as if only men's activities are important, ignoring what women do. For years, researchers studying occupations focused on the paid work of men and overlooked the housework and child care traditionally performed by women. Research that seeks to understand human behavior cannot ignore half of humanity.

2. **Gynocentricity**—seeing the world from a female perspective—can also limit good sociological investigation. However, in our male-dominated society, this problem arises less often.

3. **Overgeneralizing.** This problem occurs when researchers use data drawn from people of only one sex to support conclusions about "humanity" or "society." Gathering information by talking to only male students and then drawing conclusions about an entire campus would be an example of overgeneralizing.

3. **Gender blindness.** Failing to consider gender at all is known as gender blindness. As is evident throughout

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### SUMMING UP

**Three Research Orientations in Sociology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positivist Sociology</th>
<th>Interpretive Sociology</th>
<th>Critical Sociology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is reality?</strong></td>
<td>Society is an orderly system. There is an objective reality &quot;out there.&quot;</td>
<td>Society is ongoing interaction. People construct reality as they attach meanings to their behavior.</td>
<td>Society is patterns of inequality. Reality is that some categories of people dominate others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do we conduct research?</strong></td>
<td>Using a scientific orientation, the researcher carefully observes behavior, gathering empirical, ideally quantitative data.</td>
<td>Seeking to look &quot;deeper&quot; than outward behavior, the researcher focuses on subjective meaning. The researcher gathers qualitative data, discovering the subjective sense people make of their world.</td>
<td>Seeking to go beyond positivism's focus on studying the world as it is, the researcher is guided by politics and uses research as a strategy to bring about desired social change.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is the corresponding theoretical approach?</strong></td>
<td>Structural-functional approach</td>
<td>Symbolic-interaction approach</td>
<td>Social-conflict approach</td>
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this text, the lives of men and women differ in countless ways. A study of growing old in the United States might suffer from gender blindness if it overlooked the fact that most elderly men live with their wives but elderly women typically live alone.

4. **Double standards.** Researchers must be careful not to distort what they study by judging men and women differently. For example, a family researcher who labels a couple as “man and wife” may define the man as the “head of the household” and treat him as important, paying little attention to a woman whom the researcher assumes simply plays a supporting role.

5. **Interference.** Another way gender can distort a study is if a subject reacts to the sex of the researcher, interfering with the research operation. While studying a small community in Sicily, for instance, Maureen Giovannini (1992) found that many men treated her as a woman rather than as a researcher. Some thought it was wrong for an unmarried woman to speak privately with a man. Others denied Giovannini access to places they considered off-limits to women.

There is nothing wrong with focusing research on people of one sex or the other. But all sociologists, as well as people who read their work, should be mindful of how gender can affect an investigation.

**Research Ethics**

Like all researchers, sociologists must be aware that research can harm as well as help subjects or communities. For this reason, the American Sociological Association (ASA)—the major professional association of sociologists in North America—has established formal guidelines for conducting research (1997).

Sociologists must try to be skillful and fair-minded in their work. They must disclose all research findings without omitting significant data. They should make their results available to other sociologists who may want to conduct a similar study.

Sociologists must also make sure that the subjects taking part in a research project are not harmed, and they must stop their work right away if they suspect that any subject is at risk of harm. Researchers are also required to protect the privacy of anyone involved in a research project, even if they come under pressure from authorities, such as the police or the courts, to release confidential information. Researchers must also get the *informed consent* of participants, which means that the subjects must understand the responsibilities and risks that the research involves before agreeing to take part.

Another guideline concerns funding. Sociologists must reveal in their published results the sources of all financial support. They must avoid accepting money from a source

If you ask only male subjects about their attitudes or actions, you may be able to support conclusions about “men” but not more generally about “people.” What would a researcher have to do to ensure that research data support conclusions about all of society?
Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, and Gender

Studying the Lives of Hispanics

Jorge: If you are going to include Latinos in your research, you need to learn a little about their culture.
Mark: I’m interviewing lots of different families. What’s special about interviewing Latinos?
Jorge: Sit down and I’ll tell you a few things you need to know....

Because U.S. society is racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse, all of us have to work with people who differ from ourselves. The same is true of sociologists. Learning, in advance, the ways of life of any category of people can ease the research process and ensure that there will be no hard feelings when the work is finished.

Gerardo Marin and Barbara Van Oss Marin (1991) have identified five areas of concern in conducting research with Hispanic people:

1. Be careful with terms. The Marins point out that the term "Hispanic" is a label of convenience used by the U.S. Census Bureau. Few people of Spanish descent think of themselves as "Hispanic"; most identify with a particular country (generally, with a Latin American nation, such as Mexico or Argentina, or with Spain).

2. Be aware of cultural differences. By and large, the United States is individualistic and competitive. Many Hispanics, by contrast, place more value on cooperation and community. An outsider may judge the behavior of a Hispanic subject as conformist or overly trusting when in fact the person is simply trying to be helpful. Researchers should also realize that Hispanic respondents might express agreement with a particular statement merely out of politeness.

3. Anticipate family dynamics. Generally speaking, Hispanic cultures have strong family loyalties. Asking subjects to reveal information about another family member may make them uncomfortable or even angry. The Marins add that in the home, a researcher’s request to speak privately with a Hispanic woman may provoke suspicion or outright disapproval from her husband or father.

4. Take your time. Spanish cultures, the Marins explain, tend to place the quality of relationships above simply getting a job done. A non-Hispanic researcher who tries to hurry an interview with a Hispanic family out of a desire not to delay the family’s dinner may be considered rude for not proceeding at a more sociable and relaxed pace.

5. Think about personal space. Finally, Hispanics typically maintain closer physical contact than many non-Hispanics. Thus researchers who seat themselves across the room from their subjects may seem standoffish. Researchers might also wrongly label Hispanics as “pushy” if they move closer than non-Hispanic people find comfortable.

Of course, Hispanics differ among themselves just as people in any category do, and these generalizations apply to some more than to others. But investigators should be aware of cultural dynamics when carrying out any research, especially in the United States, where hundreds of distinctive categories of people make up our multicultural society.

What Do You Think?

1. Give a specific example of damage to a study that might take place if researchers are not sensitive to the culture of their subjects.
2. What do researchers need to do to avoid the kinds of problems noted here?
3. Discuss the research process with classmates from various cultural backgrounds. In what ways are the concerns raised by people of different cultural backgrounds similar? In what ways do they differ?

Finally, there are global dimensions to research ethics. Before beginning research in another country, an investigator must become familiar enough with that society to understand what people there are likely to regard as a violation of privacy or a source of personal danger. In a diverse society such as the United States, the same rule applies to studying people whose cultural background differs from your own. The Thinking About Diversity box offers some tips on the sensitivity outsiders should apply when studying Hispanic communities.
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VIDEO
The Basics: Sociological Theory and Research (6:29)
This video explains how sociologists use the major theoretical approaches when they conduct research, and explores the historical context in which each of these theoretical approaches developed, specifically in the work of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber.

Research Methods

2.4 Explain why a researcher might choose each of sociology’s research methods.

A research method is a systematic plan for doing research. Four commonly used methods of sociological investigation are experiments, surveys, participant observation, and the use of existing data. None is better or worse than any other. Rather, just as a carpenter selects a particular tool for a specific task, researchers select a method—or mix several methods—according to whom they want to study and what they wish to learn.

Testing a Hypothesis:

The Experiment

The experiment is a research method for investigating cause and effect under highly controlled conditions. Experiments closely follow the logic of science, and experimental research is typically explanatory, asking not just what happens but also why. In most cases, researchers create an experiment to test a hypothesis, a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables. A hypothesis typically takes the form of an if-then statement: If this particular thing were to happen, then that particular thing will result.

In an experiment, a researcher gathers the evidence needed to reject or not to reject the hypothesis in four steps: (1) State which variable is the independent variable (the “cause” of the change) and which is the dependent variable (the “effect,” the thing that is changed). (2) Measure the initial value of the dependent variable. (3) Expose the dependent variable to the independent variable (the “cause” or “treatment”). (4) Measure the dependent variable again to see what change, if any, took place. If the expected change took place, the experiment supports the hypothesis; if not, the hypothesis must be modified.

But a change in the dependent variable could be due to something other than the supposed cause. (Think back to our discussion of spurious correlations.) To be certain that they identify the correct cause, researchers carefully control other factors that might affect the outcome of the experiment. Such control is easiest to achieve in a laboratory, a setting specially constructed to neutralize outside influences.

Another strategy to gain control is dividing subjects into an experimental group and a control group. Early in the study, the researcher measures the dependent variable for subjects in both groups but later exposes only the experimental group to the independent variable or treatment. (The control group typically gets a placebo, a treatment that the members of the group think is the same but really has no effect on the experiment.) Then the investigator measures the subjects in both groups again. Any factor occurring during the course of the research that influences people in the experimental group (say, a news event) would do the same to those in the control group, thus controlling or “washing out” the factor. By comparing the before and after measurements of the two groups, a researcher can learn how much of the change is due to the independent variable.

THE HAWTHORNE EFFECT

Researchers need to be aware that subjects’ behavior may change simply because they are getting special attention, as one classic experiment revealed. In the late 1930s, the Western Electric Company hired researchers to investigate worker productivity in its Hawthorne factory near Chicago (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). One experiment tested the hypothesis that increasing the available lighting would raise worker output. First, researchers measured worker productivity or output (the dependent variable). Then they increased the lighting (the independent variable) and measured output a second time. Productivity had gone up, a result that supported the hypothesis. But when the research team later turned the lighting back down, productivity increased again. What was going on? The researchers concluded that the employees were working harder (even if they could not see as well) simply because people were paying attention to them and measuring their output. Although this conclusion has been called into question by the results of later research, social scientists still use the term Hawthorne effect to refer to a change in a subject’s behavior caused simply by the awareness of being studied (Leavitt & List, 2009).

ILLUSTRATION OF AN EXPERIMENT: THE “STANFORD COUNTY PRISON”

Prisons can be violent settings, but is this due simply to the “bad” people who end up there? Or as Philip Zimbardo suspected, does the prison itself somehow cause violent behavior? This question led Zimbardo to devise a fascinating experiment, which he called the “Stanford County Prison” (Zimbardo, 1972; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

Zimbardo thought that once inside a prison, even emotionally healthy people are likely to engage in violence. Thus Zimbardo treated the prison setting as the independent variable capable of causing violence, the dependent variable.

To test this hypothesis, Zimbardo’s research team constructed a realistic-looking “prison” in the basement of the psychology building on the campus of California’s Stanford University. Then they placed an ad in the local newspaper, offering to pay young men to help with a two-week research project. To each of the seventy who responded they administered a series of physical and psychological tests and then selected the healthiest twenty-four.

The next step was to randomly assign half the men to be “prisoners” and half to be “guards.” The plan called for the guards and prisoners to spend the next two weeks in
Philip Zimbardo’s research helps explain why violence is a common element in our society’s prisons. At the same time, his work demonstrates the dangers that sociological investigation poses for subjects and the need for investigators to observe ethical standards that protect the welfare of people who participate in research.

the mock prison. The prisoners began their part of the experiment soon afterward when the city police “arrested” them at their homes. After searching and handcuffing the men, the police drove them to the local police station, where they were fingerprinted. Then police transported their captives to the Stanford prison, where the guards locked them up. Zimbardo started his video camera rolling and watched to see what would happen next.

The experiment turned into more than anyone had bargained for. Both guards and prisoners soon became embittered and hostile toward one another. Guards humiliated the prisoners by assigning them tasks such as cleaning out toilets with their bare hands. The prisoners resisted and insulted the guards. Within four days, the researchers removed five prisoners who displayed “extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety” (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973:81). Before the end of the first week, the situation had become so bad that the researchers had to cancel the experiment. Zimbardo explains:

The ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards. (Zimbardo, 1972:4)

The events that unfolded at the “Stanford County Prison” supported Zimbardo’s hypothesis that prison violence is rooted in the social character of the jail setting, not in the personalities of guards and prisoners. This finding raises questions about our society’s prisons, suggesting the need for basic reform. Notice, too, that this experiment shows the potential of research to threaten the physical and mental well-being of subjects. Such dangers are not always as obvious as they were in this case. Therefore, researchers must carefully consider the potential harm to subjects at all stages of their work and halt any study, as Zimbardo did, if subjects suffer harm of any kind.

EVALUATE

In carrying out the “Stanford County Prison” study, the researchers chose to do an experiment because they were interested in testing a hypothesis. In this case, Zimbardo and his colleagues wanted to find out if the prison setting itself (rather than the personalities of individual guards and prisoners) is the cause of prison violence. The fact that the “prison” erupted in violence—even when using guards and prisoners with “healthy” profiles—supports their hypothesis.

CHECK YOUR LEARNING What was Zimbardo’s conclusion? How might Zimbardo’s findings help explain the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers after the 2003 invasion?

Asking Questions: Survey Research

A survey is a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions on a questionnaire or in an interview. The most widely used of all research methods, the survey is well suited to studying what cannot be observed directly, such as political attitudes or religious beliefs. Sometimes surveys provide clues about cause and effect, but typically they yield descriptive findings, painting a picture of people’s views on some issue.
POPULATION AND SAMPLE A survey targets some population, the people who are the focus of research. Lois Benjamin, in her study of racism described at the beginning of this chapter, studied a select population—talented African Americans. Other surveys, such as political polls that predict election results, treat every adult in the country as the population.

Obviously, contacting millions of people is impossible for even the best-funded and most patient researcher. Fortunately, there is an easier way that yields accurate results: Researchers collect data from a sample, a part of a population that represents the whole. Benjamin chose 100 talented African Americans as her sample. National political polls typically survey a sample of about 1,000 people.

Everyone uses the logic of sampling all the time. If you look at students sitting near you and notice five or six heads nodding off, you might conclude that the class finds the day’s lecture dull. In reaching this conclusion, you are making a judgment about all the people in the class (the population) from observing some of your classmates (the sample).

But how can researchers be sure that a sample really represents the entire population? One way is through random sampling, in which researchers draw a sample from the population at random so that every person in the population has an equal chance of being selected. The mathematical laws of probability dictate that a random sample is likely to represent the population as a whole. Selecting a random sample usually involves listing everyone in the population and using a computer to make random selections to make up the sample.

Beginning researchers sometimes make the mistake of assuming that “randomly” walking up to people on the street or in a mall produces a sample that is representative of the entire city. This technique does not produce a random sample because it does not give every person an equal chance to be included in the study. For one thing, on any street or in any mall whether in a rich neighborhood or near a college campus, we will find more of some kinds of people than others. The fact that the researcher may find some categories of people to be more approachable than others is another source of bias.

Although constructing a good sample is no simple task, it offers a considerable savings in time and expense. We are spared the tedious work of contacting everyone in a population, yet we can obtain essentially the same results.

USING QUESTIONNAIRES Selecting subjects is just the first step in carrying out a survey. Also needed is a plan for asking questions and recording answers. Most surveys use a questionnaire for this purpose.

A questionnaire is a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects. One type of questionnaire provides not only the questions but also a selection of fixed responses (similar to a multiple-choice examination). This closed-ended format makes it fairly easy to analyze the results, but by narrowing the range of responses, it can also distort the findings. For example, Frederick Lorenz and Brent Brunton (1996) found that the number of hours per week students say they study for a college course depends on the options offered to them on the questionnaire. When the researchers presented students with options ranging from one hour or less to nine hours or more, 75 percent said that they studied four hours or less per week. But when subjects in a comparable group were given choices ranging from four hours or less to twelve hours or longer (a higher figure that suggests students should study more), they suddenly became more studious; only 34 percent reported that they studied four hours or less each week.

A second type of questionnaire, using an open-ended format, allows subjects to respond freely, expressing various shades of opinion. The drawback of this approach is that the researcher has to make sense out of what can be a very wide range of answers.

The researcher must also decide how to present questions to subjects. Most often, researchers use a self-administered survey, mailing or e-mailing questionnaires to respondents and asking them to complete the form and send it back. Since no researcher is present when subjects read the questionnaire, it must be both inviting and clearly written. Pretesting a self-administered questionnaire with a small number of people before sending it to the entire sample can prevent the costly problem of finding out—too late—that instructions or questions were confusing.

Using the mail or e-mail allows a researcher to contact a large number of people over a wide geographic area at minimal expense. But many people who receive such questionnaires treat them as junk mail, so typically...
CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS  An interview is a series of questions a researcher asks respondents in person. In a closed-format design, researchers read a question or statement and then ask the subject to select a response from several that are presented. More commonly, however, interviews are open-ended so that subjects can respond as they choose and researchers can probe with follow-up questions. In either case, the researcher must guard against influencing a subject, which can be as easy as raising an eyebrow when a person begins to answer.

Although subjects are more likely to complete a survey if contacted personally by the researcher, interviews have some disadvantages: Tracking people down can be costly and takes time, especially if subjects do not live in the same area. Telephone interviews allow far greater “reach,” but the impersonality of cold calls by telephone (especially when reaching answering machines) can lower the response rate.

In both questionnaires and interviews, how a question is worded greatly affects how people answer. For example, when asked during the 2008 presidential campaign if Barack Obama’s race would make them less likely to vote for him, only 3 or 4 percent of people said yes. Yet if the question was changed to ask if the United States is ready to elect a black president, then almost 20 percent expressed some doubt. Similarly, if researchers asked U.S. adults if they support our military, a large majority of people said yes. Yet when researchers asked people if they supported what the military was trying to do in Iraq, most said no.

When it comes to survey questions, the exact wording will always affect responses. This is especially true if emotionally loaded language is used. Any words that trigger an emotional response in subjects will sway the results. For instance, using the expression “welfare mothers” rather than “women who receive public assistance” adds an emotional element to a question that encourages people to express a negative attitude.

Another problem is that researchers may confuse respondents by asking a double question, such as “Do you think that the government should reduce the deficit by cutting spending and raising taxes?” The issue here is that a subject could very well agree with one part of the question but not the other.

Focus groups are a type of survey in which a small number of people representing a target population are asked for their opinions about some issue or product. Here a sociology professor asks students to evaluate textbooks for use in her introductory class.
but not the other, so that forcing a subject to say yes or no distorts the opinion the researcher is trying to measure.

Conducting a good interview means standardizing the technique—treating all subjects in the same way. But this, too, can be problematic. Drawing people out requires establishing rapport, which in turn depends on responding naturally to the particular person being interviewed, as you would in a normal conversation. In the end, researchers have to decide where to strike the balance between uniformity and rapport (Lavin & Maynard, 2001).

ILLUSTRATION OF SURVEY RESEARCH: STUDYING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELITE This chapter began by explaining how Lois Benjamin came to investigate the effects of racism on talented African American men and women. Benjamin suspected that personal achievement did not prevent hostility based on skin color. She believed this because of her own negative experiences after becoming the first black professor at the University of Tampa. But was she the exception or the rule? To answer this question, Benjamin set out to discover whether—and if so, how—racism affected other successful African Americans.

Benjamin chose to interview subjects rather than distribute a questionnaire because she wanted to talk with her subjects, ask follow-up questions, and pursue topics that might come up in conversation. A second reason Benjamin favored interviews over questionnaires is that racism is a sensitive topic. A supportive investigator can make it easier for subjects to respond to painful questions more freely.

Because conducting interviews takes a great deal of time, Benjamin had to limit the number of people in her study. Benjamin settled for a sample of 100 men and women. Even this small number kept Benjamin busy for more than two years as she scheduled interviews, traveled all over the country, and met with her respondents. She spent two more years analyzing the tapes of her interviews, deciding what the hours of talk told her about racism, and writing up her results.

Benjamin began by interviewing people she knew and asking them to suggest others. This strategy is called snowball sampling because the number of individuals included grows rapidly over time. Snowball sampling is an easy way to do research: We begin with familiar people who introduce us to their friends and colleagues. The drawback is that snowball sampling rarely produces a sample that is representative of the larger population. Benjamin’s sample probably contained many like-minded individuals, and it was certainly biased toward people willing to talk openly about race. She understood these problems and tried to include in her sample people of both sexes, of different ages, and from different regions of the country. The Thinking About Diversity box on page 46 presents a statistical profile of Benjamin’s respondents and some tips on how to read tables.

Benjamin based all her interviews on a series of questions with an open-ended format so that her subjects could say whatever they wished. As usually happens, the interviews took place in a wide range of settings. She met subjects in offices (hers or theirs), in hotel rooms, and in cars. So as not to be distracted by having to take notes, Benjamin tape-recorded the conversations, which lasted from two-and-one-half to three hours.

As research ethics demand, Benjamin offered full anonymity to participants. Even so, many—including notables such as Vernon E. Jordan Jr. (former president of the National Urban League) and Yvonne Walker-Taylor (first woman president of Wilberforce University)—were used to being in the public eye and allowed Benjamin to use their names.

What surprised Benjamin most about her research was how eagerly many people responded to her request for an interview. These normally busy men and women seemed to want to go out of their way to contribute to her project. Benjamin reports, too, that once the interviews were under way, many became very emotional, and about 40 of her 100 subjects cried. For them, apparently, the research provided a chance to release feelings and share experiences that they had never revealed to anyone before. How did Benjamin respond to the expression of such sentiments? She reports that she cried right along with her respondents.

Of the research orientations described earlier in the chapter, you will see that Benjamin’s study fits best under interpretive sociology (she explored what race meant to her subjects) and critical sociology (she undertook the study partly to document that racial prejudice still exists). Many of her subjects reported fearing that race might someday undermine their success, and others spoke of a race-based “glass ceiling” preventing them from reaching the highest positions in our society. Benjamin concluded that despite the improving social standing of African Americans, black people in the United States still feel the sting of racial hostility.

**EVALUATE**

Professor Benjamin chose the survey as her method because she wanted to ask a lot of questions and gather information from her subjects. Certainly, some of the information she collected could have been done using a questionnaire. But she decided to carry out interviews because she was dealing with a complex and sensitive topic. Interacting with her subjects one on one for several hours, Benjamin could put them at ease, discuss personal matters, and ask them follow-up questions.

**CHECK YOUR LEARNING** Do you think this research could have been carried out by a white sociologist? Why or why not?
Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, and Gender

Lois Benjamin’s African American Elite: Using Tables in Research

Say you want to present a lot of information about a diverse population. How do you do it quickly and easily? The answer is by using a table. A table provides a lot of information in a small amount of space, so learning to read tables can increase your reading efficiency. When you spot a table, look first at the title to see what information it contains. The table presented here provides a profile of the 100 subjects participating in Lois Benjamin’s research. Across the top of the table, you will see eight variables that describe these men and women. Reading down each column, note the categories within each variable; the percentages in each column add up to 100.

Starting at the top left, we see that Benjamin’s sample was mostly men (83 percent versus 37 percent women). In terms of age, most of the respondents (68 percent) were in the middle stage of life, and most grew up in a predominantly black community in the South or in the North or Midwest region of the United States.

These individuals are indeed a professional elite. Notice that half have earned either a doctorate (32 percent) or a medical or law degree (17 percent). Given their extensive education (and Benjamin’s own position as a professor), we should not be surprised that the largest share (35 percent) work in academic institutions. In terms of income, these are wealthy individuals, with most (64 percent) earning more than $50,000 annually back in 1990 (a salary that only 42 percent of full-time workers make even today).

Finally, we see that these 100 individuals are generally left-of-center in their political views. In part, this reflects their extensive schooling (which encourages progressive thinking) and the tendency of academics to fall on the liberal side of the political spectrum.

What Do You Think?
1. Why are statistical data, such as those in this table, an efficient way to convey a lot of information?
2. Looking at the table, can you determine how long it took most people to become part of this elite? Explain your answer.
3. Do you see any ways in which this African American elite might differ from a comparable white elite? If so, what are the differences you see?

### The Talented One Hundred: Lois Benjamin’s African American Elite

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Childhood Racial Setting</th>
<th>Childhood Region</th>
<th>Highest Educational Degree</th>
<th>Job Sector</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Political Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35 or younger 6%</td>
<td>Mostly black 71%</td>
<td>West 6%</td>
<td>Doctorate 32%</td>
<td>College or university 35%</td>
<td>More than $50,000 64%</td>
<td>Radical left 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36 to 64 68%</td>
<td>Mostly white 15%</td>
<td>North or Midwest 32%</td>
<td>Medical or law 17%</td>
<td>Private, for-profit 17%</td>
<td>$35,000 to $50,000 18%</td>
<td>Liberal 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55 or older 26%</td>
<td>Racially mixed 14%</td>
<td>South 36%</td>
<td>Master’s 27%</td>
<td>Private, nonprofit 9%</td>
<td>$20,000 to $34,999 12%</td>
<td>Moderate 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s 13%</td>
<td>Government 22%</td>
<td>Less than $20,000 6%</td>
<td>Conservative 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Less 11%</td>
<td>Self-employed 14%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Depends on issue 14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired 3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


In the Field: Participant Observation

Lois Benjamin’s research demonstrates that sociological investigation takes place not only in laboratories but also “in the field,” that is, where people carry on their everyday lives. The most widely used strategy for field study is **participant observation**, a research method in which investigators systematically observe people while joining them in their routine activities.

This method allows researchers an inside look at social life in any natural setting, from a nightclub to a religious seminary. Sociologists call their account of social life in some setting a **case study**. Cultural anthropologists use participant observation to study other societies, calling this method **fieldwork** and calling their research results an **ethnography**.

ILLUSTRATIVE STUDY

Did you ever wonder why you have such different reactions to the same unfamiliar experience?
At the beginning of a field study, most investigators do not have a specific hypothesis in mind. In fact, they may not yet realize what the important questions will turn out to be. Thus most participant observation is exploratory and descriptive.

As its name suggests, participant observation has two sides. On one hand, getting an insider’s look depends on becoming a participant in the setting—"hanging out" with the research subjects and trying to act, think, and even feel the way they do. Compared to experiments and survey research, participant observation has few hard-and-fast rules. But it is precisely this flexibility that allows investigators to explore the unfamiliar and adapt to the unexpected.

Unlike other research methods, participant observation may require that the researcher enter the setting not for a week or two but for months or even years. At the same time, however, the researcher must maintain some distance while acting as an observer, mentally stepping back to record field notes and later to interpret them. Because the investigator must both "play the participant" to win acceptance and gain access to people’s lives and "play the observer" to maintain the distance needed for thoughtful analysis, there is an inherent tension in this method. Carrying out the twin roles of insider participant and outsider observer often comes down to a series of careful compromises.

Most sociologists perform participant observation alone, so they—and readers, too—must remember that the results depend on the work of a single person. Participant observation usually falls within interpretive sociology, yielding mostly qualitative data—the researcher’s accounts of people’s lives and what they think of themselves and the world around them—although researchers sometimes collect some quantitative (numerical) data. From a scientific point of view, participant observation is a "soft" method that relies heavily on personal judgment and lacks scientific rigor. Yet its personal approach is also a strength: Where a high-profile team of sociologists administering formal surveys might disrupt many social settings, a sensitive participant observer can often gain important insight into people’s behavior.

ILLUSTRATION OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:
STUDYING THE HOMELESS IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI
Did you ever wonder what life was like in some new and unfamiliar place? For one young sociologist, this question has been at the center of his life. Joseph "Piko" Ewoodzie was born in Ghana, in West Africa, and moved to the United States with his family as a teenager. His father’s work as a preacher required the family to move frequently, and in the process of moving, Ewoodzie had to find his way into several new communities, from midwestern Illinois to East Coast New York, and from the low-income South Bronx to the more affluent White Plains.

In 2012, Ewoodzie found himself back in the Midwest, about to embark on research for a doctoral dissertation in sociology. Already familiar with some regions of the United States, Ewoodzie had long wanted to see firsthand what life was like in the Deep South. In addition, he was curious about the lives of people whom we sometimes think of as the "poorest of the poor," those without a place to live. So he decided to study the homeless population of Jackson, Mississippi. More specifically, he set out to understand how this population, living at the margins of society, managed to get something to eat on a regular basis.

Like anyone engaged in sociological investigation, Ewoodzie considered a range of research methods. Should he develop a questionnaire and then walk around downtown Jackson asking anyone who appeared to be homeless to fill one out? Should he try to get an office on the campus of a local college and invite homeless people to come in and sit down for an interview? It was easy to see that neither of these strategies would be likely to work. Besides, Ewoodzie wanted to do more than gather information about the eating habits of homeless people. He was eager to experience their social world for himself and to discover how they lived, where they slept, and with whom they socialized. So he decided to move to Jackson and immerse himself in the homeless community. In short, he decided to become a participant observer.

Ewoodzie knew participant observation was the right method for his study, but he was still unsure of the exact steps needed to accomplish his research goal. On his first Monday morning in Jackson, he stopped by Peaches Café. He needed breakfast and this seemed as good a choice as any, and it offered the opportunity to try his hand at engaging the local people. A woman who introduced herself as Ms. Stella was single-handedly
working the grill and serving the food. Ewoodzie sat down at the counter and as the bacon sizzled, tried to figure out what to do next. Should he tell her he was a graduate student in sociology? Should he mention his interest in studying food?

After a while, he mustered up the courage to engage in small talk with a couple of guys in a booth behind him. They were talking about a basketball game that, luckily, he had watched on television the night before. He chatted with them until the topic of conversation switched to something he knew nothing about and, feeling awkward, he disengaged. His first day on the job had already taught him how difficult starting the process of fieldwork can be.

When Ewoodzie returned to Peaches the following day, the same two gentlemen were there. He exchanged greetings with them, falling into a conversation that, this time, covered a wider range of topics. The next day, it seemed almost natural to pick up the conversation with the two men, Ms. Stella, and several other customers. Ewoodzie was well on his way to becoming a "regular." Now he was in a position to strike up conversations with others and to begin learning about life in Jackson. Researchers call this part of the research experience the process of "breaking in" to the new social scene, a step that takes patience and persistence. One thing that helped in this case was Ewoodzie’s accent, which identified him as a non-Southerner. Hearing his voice, people were curious and quick to ask him where he was from. When they found out he was from Ghana, the locals—all of whom were African Americans—wanted to learn about life there.

These conversations gave Ewoodzie the opening he needed to ask about life in Jackson. But he needed to move ahead because he wanted to focus his study on homeless people. From the contacts he had made in the café, he learned about the “Opportunity Center,” a nearby facility that served homeless people as a day shelter. The next step in the research was to visit the Opportunity Center.

When Ewoodzie first arrived at the Opportunity Center, affectionately known as “the OC,” he met Ray and Billy, working at the reception desk. He would find out later that, at that time, they were both homeless. Within a few days, Ewoodzie was able to make friends with Ray and Billy. They were eager to help him and offered to provide information about the Opportunity Center and the people it served.

Ewoodzie soon learned that, on a typical day, the Opportunity Center served about 100 men and about a dozen women, providing a place to store personal belongings, to make phone calls, and to use bathrooms and showers. Further, the OC served as an address that clients could use to apply for a job or seek government assistance. The facility also was a social center for most of the clients, a place where they could stay informed about how others were doing and also exchange information about new opportunities for food and places to sleep.

Ray and Billy were a good source of information about Jackson’s soup kitchens and shelters. They also filled Ewoodzie in on various other locations, such as parks, churches, and bus stations, where people who are homeless eat, sleep, and just hang out. With this new information in hand, Ewoodzie knew what steps were needed to complete his research. Over several months, working in the field for ten to twelve hours a day, he visited all of these facilities and locations and in the process became immersed in the lives of Jackson’s homeless men.

Billie and Ray’s assistance illustrates the importance of key informants in field research. Such people are not only a source of information but also serve to introduce a researcher to others in the community. Using a key informant allows easy access to that person’s social network. Knowing people to contact in each new setting—and being able to say “I’m a friend of Billy and Ray; they said I should get in touch with you”—is obviously very helpful in gaining additional information. But using a key informant also has risks. Because any person has a particular circle of acquaintances, a key informant’s guidance is certain to “spin” or bias the study in one way or another. In addition, in the eyes of others, the reputation of the key informant—whether good or bad—usually rubs off on the investigator. So although a key informant is helpful early on, a skillful participant observer will soon seek a broader range of contacts.

Over the months that followed, Ewoodzie spent most of each day joining in conversations with homeless people. He learned about their lives and about how they made it through the day. As he got to know people better, he explained more about his research project to them. Because he had taken time to build meaningful relationships with his subjects, most people not only were willing to talk to him but also offered intimate details about their lives—personal details that a researcher never would have gathered in a single meeting using a questionnaire or even an interview. Ewoodzie also credits some of this warm reception to the South’s cultural tradition of hospitality.

As is typical of researchers who choose the method of participant observation, Ewoodzie jot down notes as he engaged in conversation. Sometimes when he couldn’t keep pace with the flow of information, he excused himself to go to the bathroom just so that he could have a few minutes to write down detailed notes. At times, he recorded conversations using his smart phone, but he did so only after asking and receiving the subject’s permission. After each day in the field, he spent several evening hours at the apartment turning his rough notes into a detailed record of his research.
As he neared the end of his months in the field, Ewoodzie reflected about what he had learned. Some homeless people had relatives living in or near Jackson and spent some time staying with family. But most of the homeless people he had come to know were living on their own and appeared regularly at the Opportunity Center and at various soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Most of the people he studied were unemployed; some had income from paid work, and most received income assistance from the government. He was surprised to learn that they used the money they had not so much for food as for medical needs and necessities such as clothing, for entertainment, and to supply their addictions to alcohol or other drugs.

But perhaps the most surprising finding to come from Ewoodzie’s (forthcoming) research was that the typical homeless person in Jackson rarely, if ever, went a day without food. Four or five soup kitchens operated in the city on any given day, and church groups and other organizations also offered food at least several days each week. Sometimes students from a nearby college would bring leftovers from the campus dining hall to feed the homeless at a nearby park. So, as long as a person stayed connected to the social network that revolved around the OC, there was no need to go hungry. At the same time, there was little choice about what to eat, and the quality of the food was uneven at best. In addition, food was not available around the clock. Breakfast and lunch were not always available earlier in the day to which they could turn later on if nothing else was available.

From his participant observation research, Ewoodzie learned much more than he intended at the outset. He saw that the greatest challenge faced by this group of homeless men was not, in fact, a lack of food. Perhaps their most immediate concern was the limited availability of safe and comfortable shelter. The homeless population of the city was greater than the number of available beds in shelters so that, especially in cold or wet weather, not everyone could find a safe space indoors. A second concern was the lack of public transportation to many places that homeless people frequented. And looking ahead, Ewoodzie concluded that the greatest long-term need among the homeless was improved literacy skills, which he saw as essential to their being able to look for, get, and hold jobs.

Participant observation is a method of sociological research that allows a researcher to investigate people as they go about their everyday lives in some “natural” setting. At its best, participant observation makes you a star in your own reality show; but living in what may be a strange setting far from home for months at a time is always challenging. Here, Joseph Ewoodzie observes students from a local college helping to provide a meal to homeless people.

Research of this kind is often used by officials in government and other organizations in formulating and redefining public policy. Ewoodzie hopes that his research will result in programs that go beyond maintaining homeless people in their present state toward expanding their opportunities to become self-supporting community members.

EVALUATE

To study the homeless population in Jackson, Mississippi, Joseph Ewoodzie chose participant observation as his research method. This was a good choice because he did not have a specific hypothesis to test, nor did he know at the outset exactly what the questions or issues would turn out to be. Ewoodzie was able to complete his study for very little money, although he had to spend long days for many months in the field. By moving to Jackson and both participating in and observing the social life at the city’s facilities for homeless people, Ewoodzie gradually was able to build an understanding and to prepare a detailed description of the way of life typical of the city’s homeless population.

CHECK YOUR LEARNING  Give an example of a topic for sociological research that would be best studied using (1) an experiment, (2) a survey, and (3) participant observation.

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Using Available Data: Existing Sources

Not all research requires investigators to collect their own data. Sometimes sociologists analyze existing sources, data already collected by others.
Seeing Ourselves

Autumn Andersen, age 64, is very civic-minded, as are most of the elderly people who represent a large segment of the population of Big Stone County, Minnesota.

William Ware, age 27, did not return his census form because he, like many of the residents of McDowell County, West Virginia, has limited literacy skills.

National Map 2-1 Census Participation Rates across the United States

Every ten years, the Census Bureau conducts a census of all U.S. households, mailing forms to each address. About 75 percent of U.S. households returned their form, as directed by law. But participation rates were higher in some places than in others. Looking at the map, what patterns do you see? What might explain lower return rates in southwestern Texas along the Mexican border and in New Mexico? What might explain the higher return rates in urban areas close to both coasts and in the Midwest?

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

The most widely used statistics in social science are gathered by government agencies. The U.S. Census Bureau carries out a comprehensive statistical study of the U.S. population every ten years and this agency also continuously updates a wide range of data about the U.S. population. National Map 2-1 provides a look at the share of households that filled out and returned their information forms as part of the 2010 national census.

Comparable data about Canada are available from Statistics Canada, a branch of that nation’s government. For international data, there are various publications of the United Nations and the World Bank. In short, data about the whole world are as close as your library or the Internet.

Using available data, such as government statistics or the findings of individual researchers, saves time and money. This approach has special appeal to sociologists with low budgets. For anyone, however, government data are generally more extensive and more accurate than what most researchers could obtain on their own.

But using existing data has problems of its own. For one thing, available data may not exist in the exact form needed. For example, you may be able to find the average salary paid to professors at your school but not separate figures for the amounts paid to women and to men. Further, there are always questions about the meaning and accuracy of work done by others. For example, in his classic study of suicide, Emile Durkheim soon discovered that there was no way to know whether a death classified as a suicide was really an accident or vice versa. In addition, various agencies use different procedures and categories in collecting data, so comparisons may be difficult. In the end, then, using existing data is a little like shopping for a used car: There are plenty of bargains out there, but you have to shop carefully.

ILLUSTRATION OF THE USE OF EXISTING SOURCES: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Why might one city have been home to many famous people and another produced hardly any famous people at all? To those of us living in the present, historical data offer a key to unlocking secrets of the past. The award-winning study Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia, by E. Digby Baltzell (1979), is a good example of how a researcher can use available data to do historical research.
This story begins when Baltzell made a chance visit to Bowdoin College in Maine. As he walked into the college library, he saw up on the wall three large portraits—of the celebrated author Nathaniel Hawthorne, the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Franklin Pierce, the fourteenth president of the United States. He soon learned that all three men were members of the same class at Bowdoin, graduating in 1825. How could it be, Baltzell wondered, that this small college had graduated more famous people in a single year than his own, much bigger University of Pennsylvania had graduated in its entire history?

To answer this question, Baltzell was soon paging through historical documents to see whether New England had really produced more famous people than his native Pennsylvania.

What were Baltzell’s data? He turned to the Dictionary of American Biography, twenty volumes profiling more than 13,000 outstanding men and women in fields such as politics, law, and the arts. The dictionary told Baltzell who was great, and he realized that the longer the biography, the more important the person is thought to be.

By the time Baltzell had identified the seventy-five individuals with the longest biographies, he saw a striking pattern. Massachusetts had the most by far, with twenty-one of the seventy-five top achievers. The New England states, combined, claimed thirty-one of the entries. By contrast, Pennsylvania could boast of only two, and all the states in the Middle Atlantic region had just twelve. Looking more closely, Baltzell discovered that most of New England’s great achievers had grown up in and around the city of Boston. Again, in stark contrast, almost no one of comparable standing came from his own Philadelphia, a city with many more people than Boston.

What could explain this remarkable pattern? Baltzell drew inspiration from the German sociologist Max Weber (1958), who argued that a region’s record of achievement was influenced by its major religious beliefs (see Chapter 4, “Society”). In the religious differences between Boston and Philadelphia, Baltzell found the answer to his puzzle. Boston was originally a Puritan settlement, founded by people who highly valued the pursuit of excellence and public achievement. Philadelphia, by contrast, was settled by Quakers, who believed in equality and avoided public notice.

Both the Puritans and the Quakers were fleeing religious persecution in England, but the two religions produced quite different cultural patterns. Convinced of humanity’s innate sinfulness, Boston’s Puritans built a rigid society in which family, church, and school regulated people’s behavior. The Puritans celebrated hard work as a means of glorifying God and viewed public success as a reassuring sign of God’s blessing. In short, Puritanism fostered a disciplined life in which people both sought and respected achievement.

Philadelphia’s Quakers, by contrast, built their way of life on the belief that all human beings are basically good. They saw little need for strong social institutions to “save” people from sinfulness. They believed in equality, so that even those who became rich considered themselves no better than anyone else. Thus rich and poor alike lived modestly and discouraged one another from standing out by seeking fame or running for public office.

In Baltzell’s sociological imagination, Boston and Philadelphia took the form of two social “test tubes”: Puritanism was poured into one, Quakerism into the other. Centuries later, we can see that different “chemical reactions” occurred in each case. The two belief systems led to different attitudes toward personal achievement, which in turn shaped the history of each region. Today, we can see that Boston’s Kennedys (despite being Catholic) are only one of that city’s many families who exemplify the Puritan pursuit of recognition and leadership. By contrast, there has never been even one family with such public stature in the entire history of Philadelphia.

Baltzell’s study used scientific logic, but it also illustrates the interpretive orientation by showing how people understood their world. His research reminds us that sociological investigation often involves mixing research orientations to fit a particular problem.
EVALUATE

The main reason Baltzell chose to use existing sources is that this is a good way to learn about history. The Dictionary of American Biography offers a great deal of information about people who lived long ago and obviously are not available for an interview. At the same time, existing sources were not created with the purpose of answering a modern-day sociologist’s questions. For this reason, using such documents requires a critical eye and a good deal of creative thinking.

CHECK YOUR LEARNING What other questions about life in the past might you wish to answer using existing sources? What sources might you use to find the answers?

The Summing Up table provides a quick review of the four major methods of sociological investigation. We now turn to our final consideration: the link between research results and sociological theory.

Research Methods and Theory

No matter how sociologists collect their data, they have to turn facts into meaning by building theory. They do this in two ways: inductive logical thought and deductive logical thought.

Inductive logical thought is reasoning that transforms specific observations into general theory. In this mode, a researcher’s thinking runs from the specific to the general and goes something like this: “I have some interesting data here; I wonder what they mean.” Baltzell’s research illustrates the inductive logical model. His data showed that one region of the country (the Boston area) had produced many more high achievers than another (the Philadelphia region). He worked “upward” from ground-level observations to the high-flying theory that religious values were a key factor in shaping people’s attitudes toward achievement.

Deductive logical thought is reasoning that transforms general theory into specific hypotheses suitable for testing. A second type of logical thought moves “downward,” in the opposite direction: Deductive logical thought is reasoning that transforms general theory into specific hypotheses suitable for testing. The researcher’s thinking runs from the general to the specific: “I have this hunch about human behavior; let’s collect some data and put it to the test.” Working deductively, the researcher first states the theory in the form of a hypothesis and then selects a method by which to test it. To the extent that the data support the hypothesis, a researcher concludes that the theory is correct; on the other hand, data that refute the hypothesis suggest that the theory needs to be revised or perhaps rejected entirely.

Philip Zimbardo’s “Stanford County Prison” experiment illustrates deductive logic. Zimbardo began with the general theory that a social environment can change human behavior. He then developed a specific, testable hypothesis: Placed in a prison setting, even emotionally well-balanced young men will behave violently. The violence that erupted soon after his experiment began supported Zimbardo’s hypothesis. Had his experiment produced friendly behavior between prisoners and guards, his hypothesis clearly would have been wrong.

Just as researchers often employ several methods over the course of one study, they typically use both kinds of logical thought. Figure 2-2 illustrates both types of reasoning: inductively building theory from observations and deductively making observations to test a theory.

SUMMING UP

Four Research Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>Existing Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>For explanatory research that specifies relationships between variables</td>
<td>For gathering information about issues that cannot be directly observed, such as attitudes and values</td>
<td>For exploratory and descriptive study of people in a “natural” setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generates quantitative data</td>
<td>Useful for descriptive and exploratory research</td>
<td>Generates qualitative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td>Provides the greatest opportunity to specify cause-and-effect relationships</td>
<td>Sampling, using questionnaires, allows surveys of large populations, interviews provide in-depth responses</td>
<td>Allows study of “natural” behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Replication of research is relatively easy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Usually inexpensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>Laboratory settings have an artificial quality</td>
<td>Questionnaires must be carefully prepared and may yield a low return rate</td>
<td>Time-consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unless the research environment is carefully controlled, results may be biased</td>
<td>Replication of research is difficult</td>
<td>Replicator must balance roles of participant and observer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, turning facts into meaning usually involves organizing and presenting statistical data. Precisely how sociologists arrange their numbers affects the conclusions they reach. In short, preparing their results amounts to spinning reality in one way or another.

Often we conclude that an argument must be true simply because there are statistics to back it up. However, we must look at statistics with a cautious eye. After all, researchers choose what data to present, they interpret their statistics, and they may use tables and graphs to steer readers toward particular conclusions.

Putting It All Together: Ten Steps in Sociological Investigation

We can summarize this chapter by outlining ten steps in the process of carrying out sociological investigation. Each step takes the form of an important question.

1. **What is your topic?** Being curious and applying the sociological perspective can generate ideas for social research at any time and in any place. Pick a topic that you find interesting and important to study.

2. **What have others already learned?** You are probably not the first person with an interest in the issue you have selected. Visit the library to see what theories and methods other researchers have applied to your topic. In reviewing the existing research, note problems that have come up to avoid repeating past mistakes.

3. **What, exactly, are your questions?** Are you seeking to explore an unfamiliar social setting? To describe some category of people? To investigate cause and effect among variables? If your study is exploratory or descriptive, identify whom you wish to study, where the research will take place, and what kinds of issues you want to explore. If it is explanatory, you must also formulate the hypothesis to be tested and operationalize each variable.

4. **What will you need to carry out research?** How much time and money are available to you? Is special equipment or training necessary? Will you be able to complete the work yourself? You should answer all these questions as you plan the research project.

5. **Are there ethical concerns?** Not all research raises serious ethical questions, but you must be sensitive to this possibility. Can the research cause harm or threaten anyone’s privacy? How might you design the study to minimize the chances for injury? Will you promise anonymity to the subjects? If so, how will you ensure that anonymity will be maintained?

6. **What method will you use?** Consider all major research strategies, as well as combinations of methods. Keep in mind that the best method depends on the kinds of questions you are asking as well as the resources available to you.

7. **How will you record the data?** Your research method is a plan for data collection. Record all information accurately and in a way that will make sense later (it may be some time before you actually write up the results of your work). Watch out for any bias that may creep into the research.

8. **What do the data tell you?** Study the data in terms of your initial questions and decide how to interpret the data you have collected. If your study involves a specific hypothesis, you must decide whether the data you collected requires that you confirm, reject, or modify the original hypothesis. Keep in mind that there may be several ways to look at your data, depending on which theoretical approach you use, and you should consider them all.

9. **What are your conclusions?** Prepare a final report stating your conclusions. How does your work advance sociological theory? Does it suggest ways to improve research methods? Does your study have policy implications? What would the general public find interesting in your work? Finally, evaluate your own work. What problems arose during the research process? What questions were left unanswered?

10. **How can you share what you’ve learned?** Consider submitting your research paper to a campus newspaper or magazine or making a presentation to your class, a campus gathering, or perhaps a meeting of professional sociologists. The point is to share what you have learned with others and to let them respond to your work.

**Figure 2-2 Deductive and Inductive Logical Thought**

Sociologists link theory and method through both inductive and deductive logic.
What are friends for?
Sociological research is the key to a deeper understanding of our everyday social world and also to knowing more about ourselves. Take friendship, for example. Everyone knows it is fun to be surrounded by friends. But did you know that friendship has real benefits for human health? What do you think they might be? Take a look at the photos shown here and learn more about what research has taught us about the positive effects of having friends.

One ten-year study of older people found that those women and men who had many friends were significantly less likely to die over the course of the research than those with few or no friends. Other long-term research confirms that people with friends not only live longer but also healthier lives than those without friends. What are the variables in this study? What conclusion is drawn about the relationship between the variables?

Perhaps the reason that friendship improves health is that friends raise our spirits and give us a more positive attitude about our lives. A final study placed young college students carrying heavy backpacks at the base of a steep hill and asked them how tough it would be to climb to the top. Subjects in the company of a friend were much more optimistic that they could make the climb than those standing there alone. Would you expect that the better the friend, the more positive the person’s attitude?

Another study looked at 3,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer and compared the rate of survival for women with many friends with that for women with few or no friends. What do you think they concluded about the effect of friendship on surviving a serious illness?
The “friendship effect” improves the health of men, too. A study of older men found that those with many friends had lower rates of heart disease than those without friends. How could you be sure of the causal direction linking these variables? That is, how can we be sure that friendship is improving health rather than good health encouraging friendship?

**Hint** In the first case, researchers defined having friends as the independent variable, and they defined longevity and health as the dependent variables. On average, those with friends (the experimental group) actually lived longer and were healthier than those without friends (the control group). In the second case, researchers found that women with many friends were several times more likely to survive their illness than those without friends. In the third case, researchers found that the longer the people had been friends, the more positive the subject’s attitude about making the climb turned out to be. The fourth case reminds us that correlation does not demonstrate cause and effect. This study, covering over six years, looked at more than 700 men, some with many friends (the experimental group) and also other men of comparable health (the control group) and few friends. Finding those with friends had better heart health tells us that friendship is the independent or causal variable. Long live friendship!

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**Seeing Sociology in Your Everyday Life**

1. The research studies discussed above demonstrate that friendship means more to people than we might think. Recall Emile Durkheim’s study of suicide in Chapter 1. How did he use sociological research to uncover more about the importance of relationships? Which one of the research methods discussed in this chapter did he use in his study of suicide?

2. As this chapter has explained, sociology involves more than a distinctive perspective and theoretical approaches. The discipline is also about learning—gaining more information about the operation of society all around us. It’s possible that you will go on to study more sociology and you might even end up doing sociological research. But there is value in knowing how to carry out a sound research project even if you never do it yourself. The value of such knowledge lies in this: In a society that feeds us a steady diet of information, knowing how to gather accurate information gives you the skills to assess what you read. The next time you hear someone—perhaps a candidate running for political office—making a claim about some issue, why not see if you can find existing data and assess the truth of the claim for yourself?

3. Go to www.sociologyinfocus.com to access the Sociology in Focus blog, where you can read the latest posts by a team of young sociologists who apply the sociological perspective to topics of popular culture.
Making the Grade

CHAPTER 2 Sociological Investigation

Basics of Sociological Investigation

2.1 Explain how scientific evidence often challenges common sense. (pages 30–31)

Two basic requirements for sociological investigation are:
- Know how to apply the sociological perspective.
- Be curious and ready to ask questions about the world around you.

What people accept as "truth" differs around the world.
- Science—a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation—is one form of truth.
- Scientific evidence gained from sociological research often challenges common sense.

Critical sociology uses research to bring about social change.

Critical sociology
- asks moral and political questions
- focuses on inequality
- rejects the principle of objectivity, claiming that all research is political
- is linked to social-conflict theory

Three Ways to Do Sociology

2.2 Describe sociology's three research orientations. (pages 31–38)

Positivist sociology studies society by systematically observing social behavior.

Positivist sociology
- requires carefully operationalizing variables and ensuring that measurement is both reliable and valid
- observes how variables are related and tries to establish cause and effect
- sees an objective reality "out there"
- favors quantitative data
- is well suited to research in a laboratory
- demands that researchers be objective and suspend their personal values and biases as they conduct research
- is loosely linked to structural-functional theory

Interpretive sociology focuses on the meanings that people attach to behavior.

Interpretive sociology
- sees reality as constructed by people in the course of their everyday lives
- favors qualitative data
- is well suited to research in a natural setting
- is linked to symbolic-interaction theory

Positivist sociology the study of society based on systematic observation of social behavior
Concept a mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form
Variable a concept whose value changes from case to case
Measurement a procedure for determining the value of a variable in a specific case
Operationalize a variable specifying exactly what is to be measured before assigning a value to a variable
Reliability consistency in measurement
Validity actually measuring exactly what you intend to measure
Cause and effect a relationship in which change in one variable causes change in another
Independent variable the variable that causes the change
Dependent variable the variable that changes
Correlation a relationship in which two (or more) variables change together
Spurious correlation an apparent but false relationship between two (or more) variables that is caused by some other variable
Control holding constant all variables except one in order to see clearly the effect of that variable
Objectivity personal neutrality in conducting research
Replication repetition of research by other investigators
Interpretive sociology the study of society that focuses on discovering the meanings people attach to their social world
Critical sociology the study of society that focuses on the need for social change

Issues Affecting Sociological Research

2.3 Identify the importance of gender and ethics in sociological research. (pages 38–40)

Gender, involving both researcher and subjects, can affect research in five ways:
- androcentricity
- overgeneralizing
- gender blindness
- double standards
- interference
Research ethics require researchers to
- protect the privacy of subjects
- obtain the informed consent of subjects
- indicate all sources of funding
- submit research to an institutional review board (IRB) to ensure it doesn't violate ethical standards

**gender** the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male

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**Research Methods**

**2.4 Explain why a researcher might choose each of sociology's research methods.** (pages 41–53)

The **experiment** allows researchers to study cause and effect between two or more variables in a controlled setting.
- Researchers conduct an experiment to test a **hypothesis**, a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables.

Example of an experiment: Zimbardo's "Stanford County Prison"

- **Survey** research uses questionnaires or interviews to gather subjects' responses to a series of questions.
- Surveys typically yield descriptive findings, painting a picture of people's views on some issue.

Example of a survey: Benjamin's "Talented One Hundred"

Through **participant observation**, researchers join with people in a social setting for an extended period of time.
- Participant observation, also called **fieldwork**, allows researchers an "inside look" at a social setting. Because researchers are not attempting to test a specific hypothesis, their research is exploratory and descriptive.

Example of participant observation: Emlen's "Study of the Homeless in Jackson, Mississippi"

Sometimes researchers analyze **existing sources**, data collected by others.
- Using existing sources, especially the widely available data collected by government agencies, can save researchers time and money.
- **Existing sources are the basis of historical research.**

Example of using existing sources: Baitzell's "Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia"

Researchers use both inductive and deductive logical thought.
- Using inductive logical thought, a researcher moves "upward" from the specific to the general.
- Using deductive logical thought, a researcher moves "downward" from the general to the specific.

Ten important steps in carrying out sociological research move from selecting a topic to sharing the results of research.

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**Research method** a systematic plan for doing research

**experiment** a research method for investigating cause and effect under highly controlled conditions

**hypothesis** a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables

**Hawthorne effect** a change in a subject's behavior caused simply by the awareness of being studied

**survey** a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions on a questionnaire or in an interview

**population** the people who are the focus of research

**sample** a part of a population that represents the whole

**questionnaire** a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects

**interview** a series of questions a researcher asks respondents in person

**participant observation** a research method in which investigators systematically observe people while joining them in their routine activities

**inductive logical thought** reasoning that transforms specific observations into general theory

**deductive logical thought** reasoning that transforms general theory into specific hypotheses suitable for testing

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REVEL offers a 15-question end-of-chapter quiz, focused on the basics of sociological investigation, research orientations and methods, and the issues affecting sociological research, that allows students to practice their content mastery.