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2

POSING QUESTIONS, CRAFTING EXPLANATIONS, AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Mellisa Holtzman

STUDENT LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 2.1 What are the three major sociological theoretical perspectives, and why is theory important?
- 2.2 How do sociologists generate research questions?
- 2.3 What are key aspects of the sociological research process?
- 2.4 How do sociologists communicate their research results, and what are the major parts of a research article?

In Chapter 1, you learned about the importance of social science research and the basic forms it takes. With that background information in mind, you are now ready to learn about the research process. Of course, this entire text is devoted to that topic, but this chapter will provide you with an overview of the process in its entirety. Later chapters will address specific aspects of the research process in more detail.

As the chapter title suggests, you can think of research as a process where sociologists (1) pose questions, (2) craft explanations, and then (3) communicate results. While true, there is actually a step that precedes these. Sociologists must start the research process by first consulting theory.

HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

Mellisa Holtzman

I started college as a psychology major. I knew I wanted to work with people and make a difference in the world. Psychology seemed like a good fit.

All was well until my sophomore year, when I took a class called "Perception." I naively believed this class would be about ESP, intuition, and other "fun" aspects of perception. I quickly discovered the class was about how the brain processes the information we perceive with our senses. I felt like I was in a biology class, and I hated it.

This class helped me realize that I did not enjoy psychology's focus on the internal processes of humans. Instead, I was far more interested in how society influences individuals. In other words, I was curious about factors that are external to humans. So, I switched my major to sociology and invested myself in understanding how culture affects people and how people, in turn, can shape and change culture. Eventually this gave rise to my interest in sexual-assault prevention.

WHAT IS THEORY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Theory refers to the general or abstract principles associated with a particular discipline—in this case, sociology. **Sociological theory**, then, represents a set of background perspectives about how the social world operates. These background perspectives are important because they shape not only the kinds of

questions sociologists ask, but also how they interpret the data they collect. In effect, theory serves as a lens through which we view the social world. As such, it is an important first step in sociological research.

Theories

Within sociology, there are three primary theoretical perspectives that inform our understandings of the social world. **Functionalism** is the perspective most closely associated with Émile Durkheim. Durkheim was a French intellectual writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He is widely considered the father of sociology because he was one of the first scholars to advocate for sociology as a distinct discipline. He argued that individuals' behaviors are shaped by the society in which they live and that a full understanding of human behavior must account for the impact of these outside influences (which he called **social facts**). Sociology, he asserted, was the discipline best suited to that task (Pampel, 2007).

Durkheim was interested in how large collections of individuals—all of whom have their own interests and needs—could work together in a coordinated way. Functionalist theory thus argues that society is composed of interrelated systems that shape and constrain individuals, and in so doing, help create, maintain, and stabilize that society (Durkheim, 1893/1984). For instance, societies rely on a number of institutions, including the political system, legal system, and educational system, to meet citizens' needs. But these institutions do more than just deliver goods and services to the populace. They also constrain the behaviors of the people who come in contact with them. For instance, the political system regulates how people interact with the government, the legal system regulates how people interact with one another, and the education system regulates how people interact with and access information. All of this regulation ensures some level of uniformity and order within society, thereby making large-scale cooperation possible. In short, functionalist theory proposes that every institution in society has an important part to play in the maintenance and stabilization of society. From this we can see that functionalist theory focuses on the *benefits* of institutions and social patterns for society.

Conflict theory, in contrast, tends to focus on the strife that institutions and social patterns create in society. Conflict theory is most closely associated with Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx and Weber both argued that institutions produce inequalities of power and resources in society. Marx, who was writing during the height of the industrial revolution in Europe, focused on social inequality related to ownership and wealth. Marx saw society as divided into two main groups: the wealthy capitalists (also called **bourgeoisie**) who own the technology and resources to make things and the workers who struggle day to day to make ends meet (also called the **proletariat**) (Marx, 1867/1977). Marx was highly critical of the long work hours, dangerous working conditions, and dismal wages 19th-century workers faced, especially since those same conditions were creating tremendous wealth for capitalists. He also argued that capitalists purposely used society's institutions, like religion, media, and politics, to keep workers divided from one another and

thus unable to protest effectively against their unfair treatment. Marx saw power struggles between the capitalists and workers as *the* defining feature of the social world—all human experiences, he argued, are fundamentally shaped by our place within this particular power struggle.

Writing more than 50 years after Marx, Weber saw power in more complex terms. Weber challenged Marx's argument that power and inequalities can be understood solely in terms of economic position. Weber argued that power stems not only from people's economic situation, which he called their **class position**, but from two additional sources. **Status positions** give people unequal access to prestige and social honor and **party position** gives people unequal access to special interest groups, such as unions, lobbies, and political associations (Weber, 1925/1978). For instance, in our society most people believe that teachers fulfill a very important and highly valued role; thus, they are held in relatively high



The status of essential workers, such as warehouse workers, changed as a result of COVID-19, as the importance of the role they play was fully recognized.

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esteem. Yet, despite having an esteemed status position, they often receive fairly low pay. As a consequence, their class position is lower than their status position. Importantly, one way for teachers to try to increase their class position is by participating in a union—it is through this party position that they can gain some additional power and push for higher pay and better benefits. Thus, while Marx focused only on power differentials based on wealth, Weber emphasized the more nuanced ways that power can operate in a society. In so doing, he gave us a powerful set of conceptual tools.

Although there are significant differences between the perspectives of Marx and Weber they share a focus on power and inequality, and that is what sets conflict theory apart from functionalism. Conflict theory tends to focus on the struggles that individuals and groups engage in as they vie for power. Rather than seeing institutions as entities that benefit society, conflict theorists view institutions as sites that often maintain inequalities, creating further conflict and strife. Many modern conflict theorists, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Patricia Hill Collins, have illustrated the degree to which these inequalities are also grounded in race, gender, and sexuality.

Symbolic interactionism (sometimes abbreviated as SI theory) is the last of the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. This theory is most closely associated with the work of George Herbert Mead, a scholar who was intensely interested in social reform and helping oppressed individuals (Pampel, 2007). In fact, his interest in helping others is one of the primary reasons why SI theory is so very different from functionalism and conflict theory.

Mead was concerned with how a person's social interactions—with their parents, friends, and teachers, for example—would influence the development of their sense of self and their life experiences (Mead, 1934/1962). Thus, unlike conflict theory and functionalism, both of which use a **macro approach** for understanding the social world, symbolic interactionism uses a **micro approach**. A macro approach is one that focuses on large-scale entities and institutions, like the economy, politics, law, and education. A micro approach is one that emphasizes individual-level and group-level interactions.

Mead's focus on social interactions is an important aspect of SI theory because he argued that social interactions create, sustain, and transform the social world. He—and many of his students—argued that the social world was produced *entirely* through social interactions. From this perspective, things like race, gender, marriage, and even religion do not have a pre-determined, inherent meaning. Rather, repeated social interactions produce the meanings and hierarchies associated with socially constructed characteristics, events, and identities. For instance, although there is no biological evidence for the belief that some races are superior to others, humans have, for a variety of historical reasons, created this idea. As our interactions continue over time, this idea is continually reinforced and maintained—so much so, that we eventually forget we created it in the first place and we assume it is based on some kind of natural truth. This perspective on the creation and maintenance of social meaning is often referred to as “the social construction of reality,” and it is a direct outgrowth of SI theory.

CONSIDER THIS...

Which theory resonates most with your world view? Why do you think you prefer this theory?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.1

Sociological Theory

In this exercise, you will test your knowledge of sociological theory.

1. What is functionalism?
 - a. A theory that suggests power dynamics are the most important variable for understanding society's functioning
 - b. A theory that suggests all parts of a society are important for that society's functioning
 - c. A theory that suggests social realities are created during and through human interactions
 - d. A theory that focuses on how intersecting identities affect an individual's life experiences

2. What is conflict theory?
 - a. A theory that is based, in part, on Durkheim's work
 - b. A theory that focuses on power
 - c. A theory that focuses on the interrelated parts of a society
 - d. A theory that focuses on women's subordinate position in society
3. What is symbolic interactionism?
 - a. A theory that suggests humans have the capacity to interpret symbols during interactions
 - b. A theory that suggests power dynamics are the most important variable for understanding society's functioning
 - c. A theory that suggests social realities are created by societal structures
 - d. A theory based in part on Marx's work
4. Why is Weber characterized as a conflict theorist?

Why Theory Matters

What does all of this theory have to do with the research process? Theory shapes the way sociologists ask questions, interpret data, and come to understand the social world. Let's consider the issue of inequality to further illustrate this point. A functionalist analyzing inequality might first note that most societies—if not all—have some degree of inequality. They might then consider the possible benefits that inequality brings to society. For example, a functionalist would argue that inequality in wages and wealth promotes hard work. By rewarding socially important positions with higher pay and status, inequality encourages talented and hard-working people to aim for these important positions. Notice that our perspective here is shaped in two important ways by our reliance on functionalism: (1) we are focusing on the possible positive contributions of inequality, and (2) we are using a macro orientation to ask how inequality benefits society rather than how it harms individuals.

Now let's consider how a conflict perspective makes sense of inequality. This perspective focuses on the ways that inequality *harms* groups of people. A conflict theorist would likely ask questions like: How do powerful groups of people (business owners, politicians, boards of directors, etc.) maintain their power and keep more subordinate groups of people (laborers, citizens, consumers, etc.) from threatening it? This is a very different way of looking at inequality! We are no longer trying to examine the benefits of inequality; instead, our focus is on the conflict and strife it causes between groups. Notice, however, that our focus is similar to functionalism in one way: We are still operating at the macro level, and that is because conflict theory focuses on how groups of people vie for power and how societal structures and institutions keep power in the hands of some and out of the hands of others.

Lastly, what would a symbolic interactionist perspective on inequality look like? Because SI theory operates at the micro level, our focus will be on how an individual's interactions with the world promote and maintain inequality. An SI theorist might ask how interactions within poor neighborhoods, schools, and family environments shape the way economically disadvantaged children come to understand their place in the world. Using an SI theory framework, we are less inclined to ask what the benefits or harms of inequality are; instead, we are likely to ask what inequality *means* for the people who experience it and how that meaning then shapes their future. Table 2.1 provides an overview of how each of these three major theories view different systems.

As you can see, theory is important in shaping how sociologists understand the social world. Theory is foundational to all that we do. Now that we understand the connection between theory and the research process, we can start to examine the other steps in the research process.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is theory, and why is it important in the research process?
2. What are the primary differences among functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism?
3. How do these differences impact the way sociologists ask questions about and come to understand the social world?

TABLE 2.1 ■ Variations in Perspective Based on Theory

	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism
Family	Provides economic support	Promotes gender inequality	Shapes a person's identity
Religion	Promotes a moral code	Separates people by beliefs	Promotes ritualized behaviors
Inequality	Motivates hard work	Creates divisions by class	Affects childhood socialization
Crime	Creates jobs (police, etc.)	Results in unfair profiling	Creates a culture of fear

POSING QUESTIONS

Why are divorced mothers more likely to have custody of their children than are divorced fathers? How do Black and Latinx individuals respond to and cope with housing discrimination? What types of community characteristics promote good health and wellbeing? These are just a few examples of **sociological questions**—questions that seek to understand the complex relationships between people and society.

Sociologists regularly pose questions about the social world. In doing so, though, they must be mindful of the difference between empirical and non-empirical questions, and inductive and deductive questions.

Empirical and Non-empirical Questions

Empirical questions are those you can answer with scientific data. In other words, you can use the steps of the research process to arrive at an answer to the question. Each of the three questions listed in the preceding section is an empirical question. We can use science to determine the processes that make it more likely that women have custody of their children than men, to identify how Black and Latinx individuals respond when they experience housing discrimination, and to identify the characteristics of communities that are associated with positive health outcomes.

Non-empirical questions, in contrast, are those that cannot be answered scientifically. They tend to be more opinion based—for instance, are mothers better parents than fathers, are white Americans better home-buyers than Black and Latinx Americans, and what are the qualities of good communities? These questions cannot be definitively answered using scientific methods, in part because what makes someone a “better” parent, home-buyer, or something a “better” community cannot be conclusively defined. Instead, it is a matter of opinion.

As sociologists, we need to ask empirical questions. Sociology is an empirical discipline and sociologists are scientists. This is an important point because sometimes people fail to recognize sociological questions as scientific questions. People often assume that science deals with the natural world or chemical reactions, but social issues can be subject to scientific scrutiny as well.

CONSIDER THIS...

Why do you think some questions are easily recognized as scientific issues while others often are not?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.2

Creating Empirical Questions

In this exercise, you will practice developing empirical questions.

Questions about emotions, feelings, and subjective perceptions can be asked in a way that is empirical. Using what you've learned about empirical questions, answer the following questions:

1. Develop an empirical question about happiness.
2. Develop an empirical question about perceptions of friendly behavior.
3. Develop an empirical question about shyness.
4. Develop an empirical question about a concept of your choice.

Inductive and Deductive Questions

Inductive reasoning involves moving from the specific to the general. **Inductive questions**, then, are those that result from specific observations of facts that a researcher thinks might point to a general tendency. Imagine that a researcher knows of 50 divorced couples with children, and in 48 cases the mothers have custody of their children. They may wonder whether this fact illustrates a broader pattern whereby mothers are given custody of their children more often than fathers. They might then generate broader research questions: Do divorced mothers generally get custody of their children more often than divorced fathers? If so, why?

Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, starts from general theory and moves toward specific examples. **Deductive questions** start with a theoretical premise that a researcher hopes to verify by examining specific observations in the social world. For instance, gender socialization theory suggests that females are taught to be caregivers, nurturers, and primary parents to children while males are taught to be breadwinners, protectors, and secondary parents to children. Given this theoretical understanding of gender roles, a researcher could set out to determine how these cultural ideas influence child custody decisions. They might ask: Do societal gender role expectations affect custody placements at divorce? And if so, how?

Sociologists ask inductive questions in some cases, and deductive questions in others. The distinction between the two types of questions is important, though, because they start and end in different places. Inductive questions start with specific patterns in social life and end by generating a general explanation for those patterns—in other words, they end by generating theory. Deductive questions are the exact opposite—they start with an existing theoretical premise and seek to test the validity of that premise by examining specific patterns in social life. In fact, here's a quick way to help you remember the difference between inductive and deductive questions. *Inductive* is associated with specific *observations* and both of these words begin with vowels, while *deductive* is associated with general *theory* and both of these words begin with consonants.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the difference between empirical and non-empirical questions?
2. What are inductive and deductive questions?
3. Why are these distinctions important?

CRAFTING EXPLANATIONS

Once we have posed a research question, we want to try to answer it. The process of crafting explanations starts by reviewing what other researchers have written on the topic. This is called a **literature review**. Sociologists read the existing research, articles, and books that address the issue they are studying. Through this process, they see which theoretical perspectives other researchers have used to understand the issue. They also develop a solid understanding of what is known about the issue and what remains to be learned.

A literature review is an important step in the research process for three reasons. First, it saves researchers from “reinventing the wheel”—investigating a question that has a well-established answer, or conducting a study that has already been conducted multiple times. Second, reviewing the existing research on a topic can help researchers refine their research question. By knowing what others have already discovered about this topic, we can sharpen and narrow our own research questions. Third, and most important, science is most useful when it builds off of itself. As sociologists, we want to ensure

that we are helping move our discipline forward. The best way to do that is to be certain we are always engaged in a dialogue with one another. Understanding the work that precedes our own is the best way to engage in that dialogue and continue to enhance our collective understanding of the social world.

Developing a Research Design

The next step in the process of crafting explanations is to develop a research design. This is when sociologists articulate their hypotheses and identify their independent and dependent variables.

A **hypothesis** is an unverified but testable statement that a researcher believes represents a potential answer to their research question. In other words, it is an educated guess—and that guess is based, in part, on sociological theory and the previously completed literature review. For instance, imagine that a sociologist wants to understand why poverty rates in the United States are significantly higher than poverty rates in other wealthy Western nations. After reading the existing literature on poverty and considering both functionalism and conflict theory, they might offer the following two hypotheses as potential answers to the research question:

1. Poverty rates are higher in the United States than in most other wealthy Western nations because a higher proportion of U.S. citizens choose not to pursue the education and training necessary to secure high-paying jobs.
2. Poverty rates are higher in the United States than in most other wealthy Western nations because U.S. tax laws perpetuate income and wealth disparities.

Notice the specificity of these hypotheses. Although they are both “educated guesses,” the guesses are informed by the existing research literature and theoretical perspectives in the field. The background information that this prior research and theory provide is precisely what allows for the formulation of detailed hypotheses. That, in turn, is what keeps advancing scientific knowledge.

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.3

Creating a Hypothesis

In this exercise, you will formulate a sociological research question.

1. Select something in the social world that intrigues you (e.g., social media, dating patterns, homelessness, economic inequality, day care for children, etc.), then list what you know about this issue.
2. Why do you think your chosen issue is important in life? How do you think it might be related to other social issues like gender, age, race, religion, etc.?
3. Write a research question based on your chosen social issue.
4. Write at least one hypothesis for your research question. Be sure to be specific—your hypothesis should not be answerable by a simple yes or no.

After formulating their hypotheses, sociologists must identify their independent and dependent variables. **Variables** are elements of the social world that can have more than one value. For instance, in the hypotheses about poverty rates, a country’s poverty rate is a variable, the tax laws are a variable, and the educational motivation of citizens is a variable. **Independent variables** (IV) are those variables that sociologists believe will impact some aspect of the social world. In the example given, the researcher believes tax laws and/or motivation levels may influence poverty rates. These concepts represent the independent variables—those are the things expected to cause a change in something else. **Dependent variables** (DV), then, are those variables that sociologists expect to be changed by something else. In this case, the level of poverty within a country is the dependent variable because the researcher believes it will be impacted by tax laws and the citizenry’s motivations.

CONSIDER THIS...

What are the IV and DV for this hypothesis? “Children who spend their leisure time playing outdoors have better health outcomes than children who spend their time watching television.”

Collecting Data

So how do sociologists answer their research questions and test their hypotheses? They collect and analyze data from the social world. **Collecting data** involves gathering information about the social world. **Analyzing data** refers to making sense of the information that has been gathered.

Let’s consider **surveys** as an example. Surveys involve asking **research subjects** (the people being studied) to respond to a series of questions that are purposely designed to elicit information about the researcher’s topic of interest. For instance, imagine a sociologist wants to understand minority group members’ perceptions of local police officers. They may generate a set of survey questions that ask minority respondents to report on how much they trust, admire, dislike, are comfortable with, and/or are suspicious of local police officers. These questions will typically be asked on paper or through an online system. Collecting data in this way is both efficient and cost-effective. It allows the researcher to gather a great deal of relatively uniform data from a large number of people.

Surveys are only one example of how sociologists can collect data. They can also use interviews, participant observation, existing documents, and experiments. Upcoming chapters will discuss various data collection methods in more detail.

Analyzing Data and Drawing Conclusions

Regardless of the data collection method sociologists use, once they have gathered their data, they must make sense of them. Data analysis can take many forms. For instance, survey data are often analyzed using **quantitative methods**—this means researchers transform respondents’ answers into numbers, enter those numbers into spreadsheets, and then use statistical programs such as Excel, SPSS, or R to help them test their hypotheses. Alternatively, data can also be analyzed using **qualitative methods**.

In this case, data are left in textual form and sociologists look for common words and phrases used by the respondents. Patterns in the way these words and phrases are used are then grouped by theme (similarities in the messages they portray) and those themes help sociologists tell the story revealed in the data.

The differences between quantitative and qualitative analyses are important and will be discussed at length in later chapters. For now, let’s return to our earlier discussion of theory because it also plays an important role in the analysis process. Because theory is the lens through which sociologists make sense of the social world, it is critical for helping sociologists contextualize their research findings. For instance, imagine you are a sociologist with an interest in crime. You have gathered data on crime rates for your city and asked city residents, politicians, and employees (police officers, court officials, etc.) to discuss how crime has or has not impacted their lives. If you analyze your data using a functionalist perspective, you will likely be attuned to the possible benefits of crime for your respondents (it creates jobs for police officers and court officials). If you use a conflict perspective, you will likely focus on the various ways power differentials impact people’s perceptions of crime (individuals with arrest records likely view the legal process with more suspicion



When using qualitative methods, sociologists look for patterns in the words and phrases of respondents in order to find larger themes in their research.

Silvia Li Volsi/EyeEm/Getty Images

and doubt than do victims, politicians, and police officers). And, if you use a symbolic interactionist perspective, you will likely emphasize what crime means to various individuals (victims of crime may feel violated while perpetrators of crime may feel they had few other choices available to them).

In short, a sociologist's theoretical approach informs not only which research questions they ask, but also the lens through which they collect and interpret their data. This is very important. Sometimes students ask: Isn't it problematic that the answers to research questions change based on the theory a sociologist uses? Doesn't that introduce potential bias? Shouldn't research questions have only one right answer? These are certainly meaningful and even understandable questions, but the answer to each of them is "not necessarily." The social world is incredibly complex. Human lives and the structures we create are messy. Consequently, there is often more than one way to define a situation. This means we frequently need multiple perspectives on the same issue. One sociologist can use one theoretical perspective to understand a particular facet of an issue. A second sociologist can then use a different theory to understand some other facet of that same issue. Why? Because research questions do not always have a single right answer. Making sense of the world we live in requires that we consider our data through a number of theoretical perspectives. When we do that, we have the best chance of understanding and shaping our social lives.

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

Chadwick Menning

Several years ago, Chadwick Menning developed an interest in sexual assault prevention on college campuses. Advocates, the media, and politicians were frequently noting that one in five college women experience a completed or attempted assault during their college career. As a result, he began to wonder what existing prevention efforts looked like on college campuses. He also wondered if those efforts could be improved. Eventually, he and colleague Mellisa Holtzman turned this curiosity into a sociological research question: What programming features increase the effectiveness of campus sexual assault prevention programs?

A review of the existing research literature made it clear that there are two broad types of prevention programs in existence:

1. Primary prevention programs provide educational information on consent, party culture, and the role of alcohol in assault. Their goal is to change the way people think about sex and assault in an effort to change our cultural understandings of these issues.
2. Risk reduction programs provide self-defense training to potential victims. Their goal is to equip individuals with the tools needed to protect themselves if they are in a dangerous situation.

The literature review also revealed that most campuses favor primary prevention programs over risk reduction programs. This means students are rarely exposed to both curriculums.

Based on this literature, they developed a hypothesis:

- College sexual assault prevention programs that address both primary prevention and risk reduction will be more effective at lowering assault rates than programs that focus on only one type of programming.

Testing this hypothesis required several steps. First, they *designed* a program that combined primary prevention and risk reduction. To do that they enlisted the help of 15 college students who spent an entire semester working alongside them to create and refine a new type of sexual assault protection program (Holtzman & Menning, 2015). This program is called Elemental.

Second, they collected survey data on students who took the program *and* on those who did not take it. They did this because they wanted to determine if Elemental participants exhibited lower assault risk than students who had not participated in the program.

Third, they used quantitative analyses to examine students' experiences with assault. They found that Elemental students experience a 66% reduction in their risk of assault compared to students who have not taken the program (Holtzman & Menning, 2019; Menning & Holtzman, 2015). And, most important, their analyses suggested this effect is due, in part, to the fact the program offers training in both primary prevention and risk reduction (Menning & Holtzman, 2020). In short, their hypothesis was supported.

Chadwick Menning is a professor of sociology at Ball State University and a co-creator of Elemental.

Discussion Question

Which steps of the research process do you see in the discussion of Elemental?

Check Your Understanding

1. Why is reviewing the literature an important step in the research process?
2. What are hypotheses, and how does theory impact their formulation?
3. What are independent and dependent variables?
4. How does theory factor into the data analysis process?

COMMUNICATING RESULTS

The final step in the research process is communicating the results—but that can mean a variety of things, including communicating findings to other scientists, to policy makers, and to the public. Importantly, the type of audience with whom a sociologist hopes to communicate will affect the strategies they use for disseminating their findings.

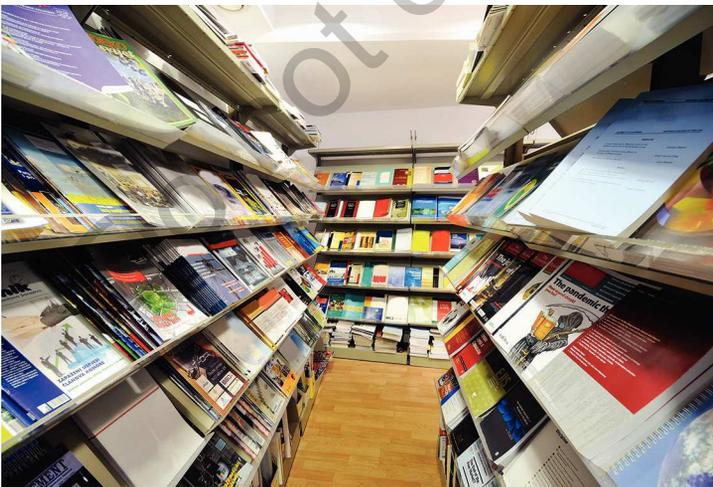
Conveying Findings

Many sociologists—especially those who work at universities or research institutes—put considerable effort into communicating their results to other scientists. This is important because peer-to-peer communication is how a discipline grows. Scientists read each other’s work and build off it (recall the literature review process discussed earlier in this chapter). There are two primary venues used for this kind of communication. First, sociologists publish their work in **academic journals**. These publications feature scientific articles describing their research question, hypotheses, methods, analyses, and findings. Getting one’s work published in a journal, however, is not an easy process. Authors must first submit their work to the journal editor for consideration. If the editor sees promise, they will send a blinded (anonymous) copy out to two or three other scientists in this field. The job of these scientists is to conduct a thorough **peer review**. They scrutinize the author’s research methods and findings, point out weaknesses, and make suggestions for improvements. They also offer a recommendation to the editor regarding whether or not the paper should be accepted for publication, rejected (declined), or given a “revise and resubmit” (a chance to make changes and try again). Often papers go through a series of peer reviews before being accepted for publication. It is not uncommon for an article to spend a year or

more in the review and publication process. This helps ensure published work is rigorous, meaningful, and as unbiased as possible.

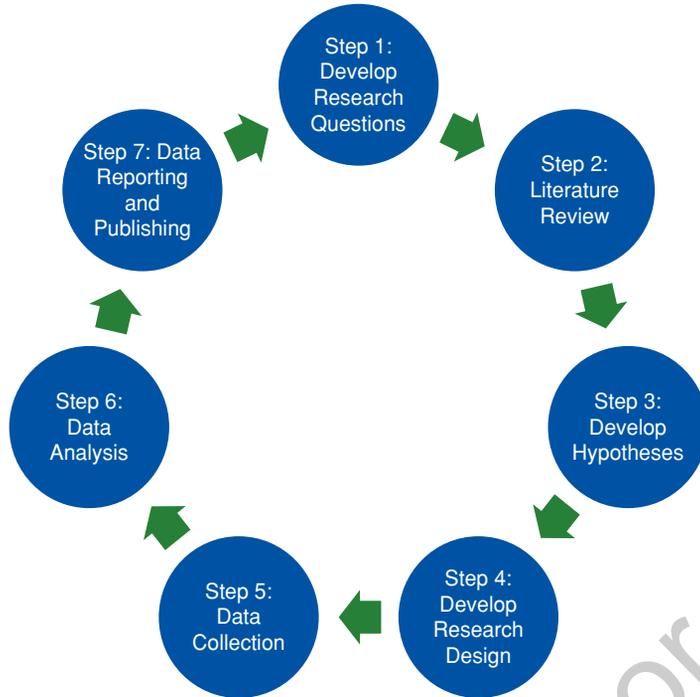
Because science relies so heavily on peer dialogue, another way for sociologists to disseminate their findings is through **academic conference presentations**. In this instance, they present their findings to a live audience during a formal presentation. Often, they are presenting work when it is in its early stages—perhaps preliminary findings—and asking the audience for feedback. This allows sociologists to refine their studies before submitting the final work to a journal for consideration.

Sociologists do not always want to convey their findings to strictly scientific audiences, though. In fact, **applied sociologists**—sometimes called **public sociologists**—are often more concerned with disseminating their findings to policy makers, community organizations, and



Academic journals are an important vessel for disseminating research findings to others in the academic community.

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FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Sociological Research Process

local citizens. They target these audiences in an effort to produce change at the local level. Rather than confining their work to academic journals read primarily by other scientists, public sociologists bring their research to everyday people by writing articles for newspapers and magazines, doing interviews with television and radio, participating in local outreach efforts, and attending community meetings.

Regardless of the type of outlet used to disseminate sociological research, communicating findings to a larger audience is an important step in the research process. It ensures continuous dialogue and growth within the field, raises community awareness on social issues, and contributes to cultural change. For all these reasons, sociological research plays a critical role in shaping our social world.

Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the steps we have discussed throughout this chapter, from developing research questions to presenting the results of that research.

CONSIDER THIS...

Newspapers, television, and social media sites can be important sources of sociological knowledge. Can you recall a media story that explicitly mentions sociology? Do you think it is important for media reports to explicitly discuss sociology?

DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.4

Understanding an Academic Abstract

In this activity, you will learn how to derive information about a sociological study from an abstract.

When researchers publish a sociological study, they almost always include what is called an “abstract,” or a very brief summary of the research that is usually only a few hundred words long but conveys quite a bit about the research that has been completed.

Read the following abstract for a sociological journal article:

This study explores if bystanders to sexual violence are assigned blame when they fail to intervene. During 2017, 31 female and 20 male U.S. college students were asked to read three of six randomly assigned sexual assault vignettes and participate in an interview about their

perceptions of bystander inaction. Qualitative analyses reveal that college students do hold bystanders accountable for inaction, but the assignment of blame depends upon the bystander's knowledge of the perpetrator's intentions, the degree of similarity between respondents and the bystanders in the vignettes, and the degree to which the bystanders could have behaved differently. Bystanders do face moderate blame for their inaction, this is true in a variety of assault situations, and it suggests bystander training increases perceptions of culpability for nonintervention. This information can help campus administrators improve the efficacy of their bystander education programs. (Holtzman, 2020)

Answer the following questions based on the abstract:

1. What sort of theory does the author appear to be using to contextualize the findings?
 - a. Functionalism
 - b. Conflict
 - c. Symbolic interactionism
2. What method of data collection is mentioned in the abstract?
 - a. Surveys
 - b. Experiments
 - c. Interviews
3. Does this appear to be quantitative or qualitative research?
 - a. Quantitative
 - b. Qualitative
 - c. Both quantitative and qualitative
4. What are the key findings of the study? Is there a conclusion? If so, what is it?

Reading Sociological Research

Before we wrap up this chapter, let's take a moment to discuss the parts of an academic journal article. This will help you learn how to read and critique scientific information. Perhaps it will not be surprising to hear that most scientific articles are divided into sections that roughly correspond to the stages of the research process. Articles generally start with a brief Introduction that states the sociologist's research question. This is followed by a review of the literature, a discussion of relevant theory, and often—particularly in deductive work—a statement of the researcher's hypotheses. The Methods section of the paper describes the research subjects, the data collection process, and the kinds of analyses conducted. The Results section outlines the study findings. The Discussion section offers an in-depth discussion of the study's implications, any possible limitations contained in the current research (e.g., the research may not apply to everyone), and future directions for research. If there are alternative interpretations of the researchers' findings, authors often make note of them in the Discussion section, and discuss how future research might clarify which interpretation makes the most sense.

Reading a journal article for the first time can feel a bit daunting, but there are a few things you can do to make the process a bit easier. First, you should recognize that there are two basic kinds of articles—those that are reporting the findings from a quantitative study and those that are reporting the findings from a qualitative study. Quantitative articles typically have many numbers and tables in them. Qualitative articles are mostly textual and often contain a large number of quotes from interviewees but relatively few (if any) tables.

Once you have identified the kind of article you are reading, you can make some strategic decisions about how you engage with each section of the article. For instance, I tell my students that when they are reading quantitative articles, they should read the Introduction and Literature Review closely because those sections contain important background information that will help them contextualize and understand the study's findings. With respect to the Methods section, however, I often tell my students that if they are new to statistical concepts and techniques, they should take what they can from the Methods section but not panic if they encounter unfamiliar words or confusing notation. Similarly, if they find the tables in the Results section confusing, they should focus their efforts on understanding the written description of the results and the summary that will be contained in the Discussion section.

These are not hard and fast rules on reading quantitative journal articles, but these tips can help ease the anxiety students often feel the first time they open a journal article.

For qualitative articles, though, the reading is a little different. In this case, the Methods section is very important because it explains how the researcher made sense of their textual data. Because qualitative research relies so heavily on a scientist's ability to organize data and recognize the patterns it contains—generally without the assistance of statistics and software packages—assessments about the reliability of their results will often hinge on your understanding of the methods that were employed. Thus, it is important to closely read the Methods sections in qualitative research. Likewise, the Results section is critical because it contains the quotes used to illustrate and give meaning to the research findings. Overall, then, qualitative articles are often slightly longer and more time-intensive to read than quantitative articles, but they also provide us with detailed and in-depth knowledge of social processes and patterns.

Check Your Understanding

1. What kinds of outlets do sociologists use to communicate their research findings?
2. What are the parts of a scientific journal article?
3. What are some strategies for reading sociological research?

CONCLUSION

As you can see, sociological research is the result of a number of interrelated processes, from the application of theory and a review of the literature to data collection, analysis, and the communication of results. Research is one of the most important things a sociologist does because it not only helps us understand our social world, it is also instrumental in helping us change it. Effective social change is based on a number of things, including dedicated people who are willing to pursue a cause, but the roles of data and research in facilitating that process cannot be overstated. In short, by learning how to do research you are, in effect, learning how to change the world!

The remaining chapters in this text will break down the research process in more detail and teach you how to engage in each of these steps. Along the way you will also learn about research ethics, mixed methodologies, and using research to promote social justice. Research is an important aspect of sociology, and although you cannot master the process in a single semester, this text will provide you with foundational knowledge that you can build upon as you continue to grow as a sociology student.

REVIEW

2.1 What are the three major sociological theoretical perspectives, and why is theory important?

There are three prominent theoretical paradigms in sociology—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism is a theoretical perspective that argues that society is composed of interrelated systems that shape and constrain individuals, and in so doing, help create, maintain, and stabilize that society. Conflict theory is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the strife that institutions and social patterns create in society. Finally, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective in which repeated social interactions produce the meanings and hierarchies associated with socially constructed characteristics, events, and identities. Theory is important because it shapes the way sociologists ask questions, interpret data, and come to understand the social world.

2.2 How do sociologists generate research questions?

Sociologists pose empirical (as opposed to non-empirical), inductive, and deductive research questions. Empirical questions are those that you can answer with scientific data; you can use

the steps of the research process to arrive at an answer to the question. Non-empirical questions cannot be answered scientifically and tend to be more opinion-based. Inductive questions result from specific observations of facts that a researcher thinks might point to a general tendency. Deductive questions start with a theoretical premise that a researcher hopes to verify by examining specific observations in the social world.

2.3 What are key aspects of the sociological research process?

Designing a study that can answer one's research questions is a multistep process. It begins by reviewing what other researchers have written on the topic. This is called a literature review. The next step is to develop a research design. This occurs when sociologists articulate their hypotheses and identify their independent and dependent variables. Sociologists then collect and analyze data from the social world. Collecting data involves gathering information about the social world. Analyzing data refers to making sense of the information that has been gathered. Because theory is the lens through which sociologists make sense of the social world, it is critical for helping sociologists contextualize their research findings.

2.4 How do sociologists communicate their research results, and what are the major parts of a research article?

Sociologists communicate their results to a larger audience through such things as scientific journals, academic conferences, or public engagement via newspaper articles, television interviews, podcasts, blogs, and community outreach events. Most scientific articles are divided into sections that roughly correspond to the stages of the research process. Articles generally start with a brief Introduction that states the sociologist's research question. This is followed by a review of the literature, a discussion of relevant theory, and often—particularly in deductive work—a statement of the researcher's hypotheses. The Methods section of the paper describes the research subjects, the data collection process, and the kinds of analyses conducted. The Results section outlines the study findings. The Discussion section offers an in-depth discussion of the study's implications, any possible limitations contained in the current research (e.g., the research may not apply to everyone), and future directions for research.

KEY TERMS

academic conference presentations	non-empirical questions
academic journals	party position
analyzing data	peer review
applied sociologists (public sociologists)	proletariat
bourgeoisie	qualitative methods
class position	quantitative methods
collecting data	research subjects
conflict theory	social facts
deductive questions	sociological questions
dependent variables	sociological theory
empirical questions	status position
functionalism	survey
hypothesis	symbolic interactionism
independent variables	theory
inductive questions	variables
literature review	
macro approach	
micro approach	

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