

# RESEARCHING THE SOCIAL WORLD

# 3

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1** Describe the scientific method.
- 2** Explain how scientific knowledge develops over time.
- 3** Describe the various methods of sociological research and the types of questions each one can help us answer.
- 4** Describe how sociologists engage in secondary data analysis.
- 5** Identify the key issues in social research, including reliability, validity, trust, legality, and avoidance of harm.

A broker monitors prices on his computer screen at the Karachi Stock Exchange in Pakistan. Data are important in many professions, particularly the sciences. How do sociologists collect and analyze data, ensure its reliability and validity, and act ethically to maintain trust?





Humanity has made amazing advances during its short existence on Earth. From the development of agriculture to the Industrial Revolution to the advent of globalization, each generation has pushed us further into an unknown future. Many of us now enjoy longer life expectancies, improved standards of living, cheap manufactured goods, readily available food, quick and effortless communication, and the ability to travel around the world. But our advancement as a species has come at a significant ecological price.

### Sociology is a science, like—and also unlike—any other.

Climate change, marked by long-term fluctuations in Earth's intricate and interwoven weather patterns, has occurred since the formation of the planet. Some fluctuations affect only specific regions, while others affect the entire world. Some span decades; others occur over millions of years. Although gradual climate change is a natural process, a growing body of careful research suggests that significant recent changes are directly attributable to human activities, including fossil fuel combustion and deforestation.

Despite this scientific consensus, our impact on climate change remains a hotly debated issue.

If the available geological, atmospheric, and oceanographic evidence is solid enough to convince the scientific community, why do so many people remain fiercely unconvinced? Who is opposed to the notion that human actions are a major cause of climate change, and how have institutional forces influenced their personal beliefs over time?

Physical science can help us understand and explain climate change, but to understand the motivations, beliefs, and actions that affect our response to it, we need sociologists and their research methods. There are many types of social research; each can uncover unknown or even unsuspected truths about the relationship between people and climate change, as well as many other social issues. Thus, sociology is a science, like—and also unlike—any other.

Like all scientists, passionate sociologists may unintentionally let their personal feelings or their drive to succeed interfere with their research. Although we all make occasional mistakes, research methods must be ethical, reliable, and valid for their results to be widely accepted. This is especially important because contemporary sociological research often deals with heated issues such as the role of people and society in climate change.

As you learn about the major types and purposes of sociological research, consider the issues and phenomena that you yourself might like to research. You may someday have an opportunity to do so. •

Sociology is a science of the social world. Research is absolutely central to such a science. All sociologists study the research of others, and most do research of their own. Sociologists may theorize, speculate, and even rely totally on their imaginations for answers to questions about society. However, they almost always do so on the basis of data or information derived from research. Put another way, sociologists practice **empiricism**, which means that they gather information and evidence using their senses, especially their eyes and ears. Of course, we all do that in order to experience the world. In addition to using their senses, sociologists adopt the scientific method, or a similarly systematic approach, in search of a thorough understanding of topics of interest to sociology. They have a variety of methods at their disposal in researching and analyzing society. They also experience a few significant constraints on their ability to conduct such research.

## THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The **scientific method** is a structured way of finding answers to questions about the world (Carey 2011). The scientific method employed by sociologists is much the same as it is in other sciences. The following text, as well as checkpoint 3.1, outline the following list of steps (although in practice, creative sociological research often does not rigidly adhere to them):

1. A sociologist uncovers *questions in need of answers*. These questions can come from issues in the larger society, personal experiences, or topics of concern within the field of sociology. The best and most durable research often stems from issues that are important to the sociologist doing the research. Karl Marx, for example, detested the exploitation of workers that characterized capitalism. Max Weber feared the impact of bureaucracies (see Chapter 2). Thus, powerful motivation spurred their research on, and key insights into, these monumentally important social realities.

2. Sociologists review the *relevant literature* on the question of interest to them. This is because others have likely done similar or related research in the past. After more than a century of doing research, sociologists have learned a great deal about many things. It would make

**empiricism** The gathering of information and evidence using one's senses, especially one's eyes and ears, to experience the social world.

**scientific method** A structured way to find answers to questions about the world.

no sense to start over from the beginning as if those in the field knew nothing about the topic being studied. For example, my work on McDonaldization (Ritzer 2013a) is based on a review of work on rationalization by Max Weber ([1921] 1968), his successors (such as Kalberg 1980), and contemporary researchers (Ram 2007). I concluded that the fast-food restaurant is an apt, current example of the rationalization process. Similarly, others have reviewed my work and that of other scholars on McDonaldization (for a collection of this work, see Ritzer 2010d). They have amplified on the concept, and they have applied it to, among many other domains, religion (Drane 2001, 2008), higher education (Hayes and Wynyard 2002), social work (Dustin 2007), and Disney World (Bryman 2004).

3. Researchers often develop *hypotheses*, or educated guesses about how social phenomena can be expected to relate to one another. For example, Uri Ram (2007) hypothesized that Israeli society would grow increasingly McDonaldized, and he found evidence to support that idea. As another example, Marx hypothesized that the conflict between capitalists and workers would ultimately lead to the collapse of capitalism. Over the years, conflict between capitalists and workers has increased in some areas of the world, but it has decreased in others. Capitalism has not collapsed, although it came close in 1929 at the beginning of the Great Depression and maybe in 2008 at the onset of the Great Recession. This makes it clear that hypotheses are, simply, hypotheses. They may not be confirmed by research or borne out by social developments.

4. Researchers must choose a *research method* that will help them to answer the research question. Sociology offers diverse methodological tools, and some are better than others for answering certain kinds of questions. For example, some sociologists are interested in how a person's social class shapes his or her opinions about social issues. They may use surveys and quantitative methods to evaluate the relationship between class position and attitudes. Other sociologists are interested in how people interpret social phenomena, and how this meaning-making shapes social action. They may use qualitative methodologies such as observation to study these issues. Specifically, they might observe how two individuals interact in a romantic context, and how they interpret certain gestures, attire, and other nonverbal cues to assess the interest of the other person. Sociologists select from among these and other methods to best answer their research questions.



Films with Research





A study of bowling concluded that unlike these bowlers of the 1890s, most people today are more likely to bowl, and undertake many other activities, alone. What makes this conclusion relevant to sociology?

5. Researchers use their chosen method to *collect data* that can confirm, or fail to confirm, their hypotheses. Many classical sociologists conducted their research in libraries, and some contemporary sociologists do as well. But many contemporary sociologists venture out into the field to collect data through observations, interviews, questionnaires, and other means.

### CHECKPOINT 3.1 THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

#### Steps in the Research Process

- 1 Uncover a question in need of an answer.
- 2 Review the relevant literature.
- 3 Develop hypotheses about how phenomena relate to one another.
- 4 Identify a method for answering the research question.
- 5 Collect data.
- 6 Analyze the data.

6. Researchers conduct an *analysis of the data* collected and their meaning in light of the hypothesis that guided the research. For example, as you learned in Chapter 2, Émile Durkheim hypothesized that those who were involved with other people would be less likely to commit suicide than those who lived more isolated existences and were experiencing what he called anomie. (For a more recent study showing the relationship between isolation [and other social breakdowns] and dying in an extreme heat wave, see Klinenberg 2003.) That is, being integrated with other people would, in a way, “protect” an individual from suicide. Analyzing data from several nineteenth-century European countries, Durkheim ([1897] 1951) found that the suicide rates were, in fact, higher for widowed or divorced people. Those who are married are presumably more socially integrated than people in these other categories.

The research process begins all over again if a researcher comes up with additional questions when analyzing the existing data. For example, Robert Putnam (2001), in his famous book *Bowling Alone*, addresses the applicability of Durkheim’s concept of anomie in the contemporary world. As the title of his book suggests, he found that people are less likely now to bowl in leagues and more likely to bowl alone. More generally, people have increasingly been doing many things alone that in the past they did with other people. Further analysis of Durkheim’s work might lead to the hypothesis that people who “bowl alone” are more likely to commit suicide.

Here’s an even more current example. Imagine that you are wondering how relying on social networks like Facebook might affect a person’s susceptibility to suicide. Having read this far in the book, you already know something about Durkheim’s work on suicide. However, as a real sociologist, you would, of course, conduct a much more thorough review of the relevant theory and research on this issue. You would find some work that argues that social networking can prevent suicide (Luxton, June, and Kinn 2011). From this, and from what you now know about Durkheim’s thinking, you might hypothesize that those who have many Facebook friends are more socially integrated and therefore less likely to commit suicide than those who have few Facebook friends, or are not on Facebook at all. An alternative hypothesis would be that no matter how many friends one has on Facebook, those who have few, if any, friends in the “real world” are more likely to commit suicide.

How would you collect data to test your hypotheses? You’d probably need to get some data about a group’s Facebook friends, their friends in the real world, and their suicide rates. You would then analyze the patterns in these data. And then, if all went well, you could determine whether either of these hypotheses is supported by the evidence. That is a scientific approach to answering your questions.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The scientific method implies that a science develops gradually and cumulatively as one set of empirical findings builds on another. Some studies fail to confirm earlier findings and come to be seen as dead ends. Other studies confirm previous findings. Confidence in those findings grows as they are confirmed by additional research, and eventually some of them begin to be treated as scientific facts. All sciences are built on such facts. Over time and with additional research, however, some widely accepted facts may be found to be erroneous. For example, early scientists who studied the brain believed that women’s relatively smaller brain size in comparison to men’s was evidence of mental inferiority. Later research demonstrated that brain size does not determine intelligence, so those earlier ideas are no longer accepted (Gould 1981; Van Valen 1974). But some facts do survive empirical tests, and those are the ones that come to be the basis of what we think of as a science. For example, as you learned in this chapter’s opening vignette, an accumulation of data from research on climate patterns is what leads most scientists to treat the idea of climate change as a scientific fact. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the most authoritative group of scientists from around the world that evaluates evidence of climate change. The IPCC built upon past findings to confirm that global warming is a scientific fact and that human activity is the main force behind it (IPCC 2007). This gradual and orderly pattern of scientific development is what we would expect from the systematic use of the scientific method and the evolution of a science.

Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 1970), a philosopher of science, proposed a different model of scientific development that focuses on the role of scientific breakthroughs. To Kuhn, what defines a science is the existence of a **paradigm**, a general model of the world that is accepted by most practitioners in the field. Examples include the idea in astronomy that Earth and the other planets revolve around the Sun and the idea in biology that “germs” cause most infectious diseases. With a generally agreed-upon paradigm, scientists need not squabble among themselves over their general orientation and their most basic premises. They are free to do research within the confines and safety of that paradigm. As research expands upon the paradigm, it is “fleshed out” in a series of tiny steps. Its fundamentals remain unaltered, at least for a time.

**paradigm** A general model of the world that is accepted by most practitioners in a field.



In proposing, in the 16th century, that the Earth revolves around the Sun and not the other way around, Nicholas Copernicus created a scientific paradigm that remains accepted today. What would a new paradigm need to do in order to displace this one?

But some research does not support the dominant paradigm, and serious questions begin to be raised. If those questions are not answered and new ones continue to be raised, the old paradigm eventually collapses and is replaced by a new paradigm. In other words, a scientific revolution occurs. Kuhn argues that it is in those revolutions, the death of an old paradigm and the birth of a new one, that science takes great leaps forward. For example, for centuries scientists believed that Earth was at the center of the universe, with the Sun orbiting it (a geocentric model). It was not until the sixteenth century, when better research methods became available, that the geocentric paradigm began to be supplanted by a paradigm that saw Earth as orbiting the Sun (a heliocentric model). This was a revolution in astronomical thought. In the centuries that followed, other astronomers built upon that knowledge and came to



the consensus that Earth and the Sun are in fact parts of one solar system within one galaxy of many in the universe. Heliocentrism remains the dominant paradigm for explaining the relationship between Earth and the Sun. However, new paradigms are developing to explain the role of both bodies in the universe as astronomers currently understand it.

Kuhn's single-paradigm approach fits very well with the history of the hard sciences such as astronomy and physics, but sociology and the other social sciences can perhaps better be seen as "multiple paradigm sciences" (Friedrichs 1970; Ritzer 1975). No single paradigm in sociology is powerful enough to unify the discipline. The result is that research tends to occur within each paradigm within the discipline, expanding all of them over time but not contributing to a consensus within sociology as a whole. Furthermore, some of the research stemming from one paradigm may be in conflict with research stemming from other paradigms. Because of these differences and conflicts, the development of sociology as a whole tends to be slower and more sporadic than in the hard sciences. Additionally, because there has never been a single dominant paradigm, there have never been any paradigm revolutions in sociology. Rather, the fortunes of various paradigms rise and fall over time.

One key aspect of a multiple-paradigm science is that it makes it more difficult to accumulate knowledge that is accepted by practically everyone in the field. Sociologists do not operate safely within the confines of a single dominant, broadly agreed-upon paradigm. The most basic assumptions of a given sociologist or group of sociologists are constantly open to question and attack by those who operate on the basis of other paradigms. The result is that sociologists often spend a good deal of their time defending the specific assumptions behind a given piece of research.

There is a much less settled, universally agreed-upon knowledge base in sociology than in, say, biology or astronomy. Nonetheless, there is a substantial body of knowledge in sociology, some of which is summarized throughout this book. Because it lacks a dominant paradigm, there are also many more controversies in sociology than there are in some other fields. Thus, you will find in sociology many interesting, stimulating, and exciting debates as well as many facts.

## SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Sociological knowledge is derived from research using a number of different methods. In most cases, the method

### CHECKPOINT 3.2

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Empirical findings → later studies confirm findings → most practitioners agree on a general paradigm → questions about the paradigm proliferate → new paradigm develops . . .

chosen is driven by the nature of the research question. Imagine that you are a sociologist and want to study the beliefs and behaviors of gamblers in Las Vegas. You might start by using the research method of observation. Observation can take a variety of forms, ranging from participating at the roulette table as a fellow gambler to watching and listening at a distance.

A more direct and focused approach would be to interview those who have come to Las Vegas to gamble. You might ask them questions about their expectations before they arrived and how those expectations related to their own previous experiences as well as to what they had heard about others' gambling experiences in Las Vegas. This would be a more efficient use of your time because it would not entail waiting around for gamblers to do or say something relevant to your research question. However, in interviews, people might not be willing to talk to you about their gambling experiences, especially if they have been losing money. Furthermore, even if they are willing to talk to you, they might not give you totally honest answers.

Another technique would be to survey a group of gamblers by administering a questionnaire. However, questions for a survey are not easy to formulate in just the right way. You would also need to figure out a good way of distributing the questionnaires to your respondents. You could hand them out to people leaving the casino. However, many might not be willing to take them, especially if, as would be likely, they had stayed up late gambling or had lost money. Even if they did take a questionnaire, they might not answer the questions or mail the questionnaire back to you.

Instead of handing out the questionnaires randomly to people leaving the casino, you could be more systematic and scientific by obtaining a list of guests at a given casino hotel. However, it is highly unlikely that you would be given such private information. You could just get a sample of people from the phone book in your hometown and mail them questionnaires, but it is unlikely that many of them would have visited Las Vegas recently. Among the relatively few who had, it is likely that only a very small number would return the completed questionnaires to you.

You could also create an experiment. For example, in a social science laboratory at your university, you could set up a Las Vegas-style poker table and recruit students as participants in the experiment. You could tell them that the typical player loses 90 percent of the time and that

previous research has shown that most players lose most of the time. You could then ask them whether, in spite of that information, they still want to gamble at your poker table. Of greatest interest would be those who said yes. You would want to interview them before they started "gambling" at your table, observe them as they gambled, and interview them again after they had finished. Did they start out believing, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that they would win? How could they have retained such a belief in spite of all the counterevidence? What are their feelings after gambling at your table? Did those feelings seem to be related to whether they won or lost? How likely are they to gamble again?

Observation, interviews, surveys, experiments, and other research methods are all useful and important to sociologists. All have strengths but also limitations. Before examining those methods and their strengths and limitations in more detail, there is one important distinction among research methods that should be discussed.

## QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

One common way in which sociologists think about different research methods is by classifying them according to the kinds of data they seek to collect and analyze. Is the method essentially qualitative or quantitative?

**Qualitative research** consists of studies done in natural settings that produce in-depth descriptive information (e.g., in respondents' own words) about the social world (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Such research does not necessarily require statistical methods for collecting and reporting data (Marshall and Rossman 2010). Observation and open-ended interviews are two of the qualitative methods used by sociologists. These methods are used to capture descriptive information

**qualitative research** Any research method that does not require statistical methods for collecting and reporting data.

**quantitative research** Any research method that involves the analysis of numerical data derived usually from surveys and experiments.

**statistics** The mathematical method used to analyze numerical data.

**descriptive statistics** Numerical data that allow researchers to see trends over time or compare differences between groups in order to describe some particular collection of data that is based on a phenomenon in the real world.

about an incredibly wide range of social phenomena. These range from social movements to cultural practices to people's lived experiences and feelings to the ways in which organizations function to interactions between nations. By gathering information from a small number of groups and individuals, they often produce rich data about the social world and in-depth understanding of particular social processes. Sometimes they help to provide insights about new areas where little research has been done. However, because qualitative methods usually rely on small sample sizes, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population; for this, we use quantitative methods.

**Quantitative research** involves the analysis of numerical data derived usually from surveys and experiments (Creswell 2008). The analysis of quantitative data on groups of people can help us to describe and to better understand important observable social realities. For example, in his analysis of social mobility in the United States, Gilbert (2011) analyzed previously collected General Social Survey (GSS) data on the relationship between the occupational status of fathers and the occupations achieved by their sons. Among the findings is the fact that 42 percent of the sons of fathers who held upper-level white-collar occupations ultimately attained similarly high-level jobs, while only 15 percent of their sons went into lower-level manual work. At the other end of the occupational hierarchy, 36 percent of the sons of fathers who held lower-level manual occupations came to hold same-level occupations, while 20 percent moved up the ladder into upper-white-collar occupations. It is clear that if your father has a higher-level position in the occupational structure, you are more likely to reach a similar level in your lifetime. Such survey data provide great insight into the process of social mobility in the United States.

The mathematical method used to analyze numerical data is **statistics**. It is a powerful tool, and most sociological researchers learn statistical methods. Statistics can aid researchers in two ways:

- When researchers want to see trends over time or compare differences between groups, they use **descriptive statistics**. The purpose of such statistics is to describe some particular body of data that is based on a phenomenon in the real world (Salkind 2004: 8–10). For example, researchers have used survey data to track trends in educational attainment over time and then used statistical analysis to describe how educational attainment varies by race, gender, and age (Crissey 2009).



Research Methods



## Port Security

Sociologists know that good theories are grounded in empirical observations. In some cases, our data are close at hand, dealing with basic aspects of our own everyday lives. In other cases, our research questions require us to leave our everyday lives behind for a time, to travel great distances, or, occasionally, to face danger. When Carolyn Nordstrom embarked on her three-year journey to gather qualitative data on globalized crime, she had to do all three of these things.

During one leg of her journey, she investigated port security by strolling through the ships and shipyards across Africa, Europe, and America. She posed a simple question: “How far, as an undefined person—possibly a shipping agent or a terrorist—could I get across the so-called protected zones of the USA borders?” (Nordstrom 2007: 195). She proceeded to test this question by engaging in a real-world experiment. She found that she often made it to the water and to ships, and back, without being stopped. Even berths with wire fences and closed gates guarded by security personnel asking for identification were surprisingly easy to enter (Nordstrom 2007: 195).

U.S. officials report that 6 percent of all shipments entering the country are checked. However, Nordstrom determined through her interviews with various dockworkers that

even this small number is overly optimistic. She spent many days at the Los Angeles dock and found that the large X-ray machine that was supposed to be used to scan for contraband was never used.

These findings forced Nordstrom to probe further: Given heightened security concerns after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, what could explain such an obvious lack of security regarding what entered and exited the country? Was it poor organization or malfeasance? Were dockworkers corrupt or lazy? Any of these explanations might account for lax security at a single port, but not for the trend of lax security in ports throughout the world. Sociologists are interested in structural explanations that are generalizable across many situations.

Nordstrom’s work can be characterized as sociological because she offers us a broad explanation of why security amounts to little more than an illusion in international shipping circuits. She explains that global trade markets depend on rapidly flowing distribution networks to be economically viable. Material moves across the border each day in such enormous amounts that it would require literally an army of inspectors and a vast array of scanning equipment to check every crate that comes through. The cost is almost inconceivable.

Cape Town, South Africa, for example, received 3,010 vessels in 2002 (a little

more than eight each day). A large ship holds about 6,000 huge containers. It takes roughly five hours to inspect one container. This amounts to 30,000 hours to inspect the entire ship, or 1,250 days of around-the-clock work. Thus, to inspect an entire ship, it would take an astounding 3.42 years. Ships are even bigger today than they were in 2002 (and there are a lot more of them), meaning that it might take even longer to inspect one of them. Because of these basic logistical and economic realities, Nordstrom concluded that comprehensive security is simply impossible given available resources. For Los Angeles to achieve even the supposed inspection rate of 6 percent, for example, the port would have to process 1,973 containers each day.

In addition to pointing up a fundamental problem with security in the international shipping industry, Nordstrom’s research shows how multiple methods, both qualitative and quantitative, can be used together to produce a generalizable finding that works across the many manifestations of a complex system.

### Think About It

Why did Carolyn Nordstrom choose observation to collect her data about port security? What were some of the real and potential drawbacks of this method for her research?

résumés to 1,300 employers and used the responses to draw broader inferences about the population of job applicants.

Sociologists often debate the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative methods, but they generally

**inferential statistics** Numerical data that allow researchers to use data from a small group to speculate with some level of certainty about a larger group.

- To test hypotheses, researchers use **inferential statistics**, which allow researchers to use data from a relatively small group to speculate with some level of certainty about a larger group. For example, researchers did a field experiment on labor market discrimination. They found that when people with comparable résumés applied for the same job, those with white-sounding names (such as Emily and Greg) were 50 percent more likely to get a callback than applicants with black-sounding names (such as Lakisha and Jamal) (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). The researchers sent out 5,000

recognize that each method has value. Each method has its own set of strengths and limitations in terms of what it can do to help a researcher to answer a specific question. Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that quantitative and qualitative research methods can complement one another (Ragin 1987; Riis 2012; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). In practice, sociologists may combine both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study.

## OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

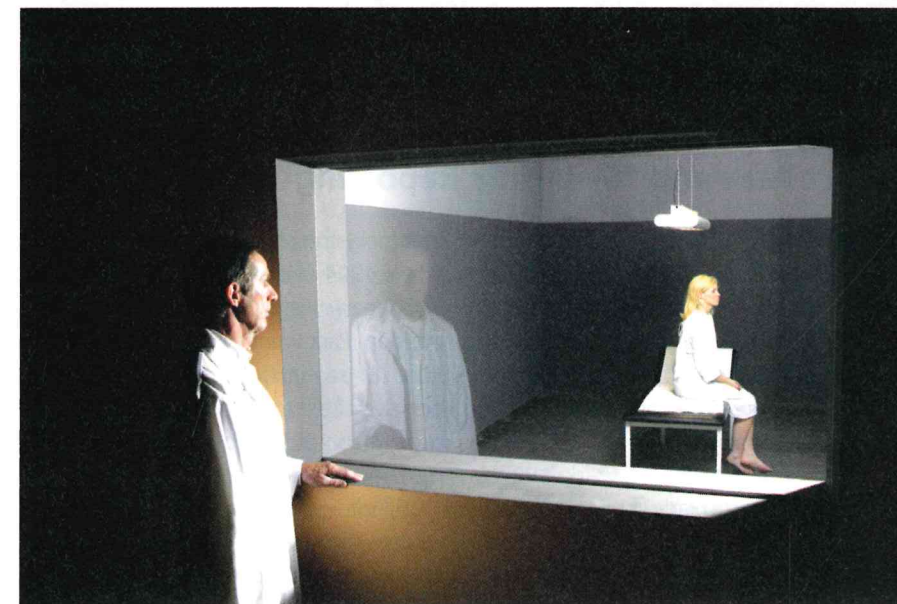
As mentioned earlier, one of the primary qualitative methods is **observation**. It consists of systematically watching, listening to, and recording what takes place in a natural social setting over some period of time (Hammersley 2007). The observational techniques of sociologists are similar to the work of investigative journalists, who also learn a great deal about their topic by keeping their eyes and ears open. The observational methods most commonly used among sociologists are participant and nonparticipant observation.

There are several key dimensions to any type of observation in sociology:

- *Degree to which those being observed are aware that they are being observed.* This dimension can vary from everyone involved being fully informed about the research to participants being observed from afar or through hidden cameras, one-way mirrors, and the like. The reality TV series *Undercover Boss* involves a kind of covert observational research. Top-level executives work at lower levels in their own firms to learn more about the work and the workers. Of course, the boss might have ulterior motives, such as uncovering and firing incompetent workers. However, sociologists who do such research are not supposed to have such motives; they are simply interested in learning more about the work world.

**observation** A research method that involves systematically watching, listening to, and recording what takes place in a natural social setting over some period of time.

**participant observation** A research method in which the researcher actually plays a role, usually a minor one, in the group or setting being observed.



Observation remains a primary investigative tool in sociology. Do you think people behave differently when they know they are being observed?

- *Degree to which the presence of the observer affects what those being observed do.* Especially when they are aware that they are being observed, people often present themselves in the way they think the observer expects or will accept. For instance, gang members might not engage in illegal activities in the presence of a researcher.

- *Degree to which the process is structured.* Highly structured observational research might use preset categories or a checklist to guide observations. At the other end of the spectrum, some observations seek the widest possible range of data and are totally open and unstructured.

Some of the most famous research in the history of sociology has been done using the observational method. Examples include *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois [1899] 1996), *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943), *Negro Streetcorner Men* (Liebow 1967), observations of African American families in *All Our Kin* (Stack 1974), and *Code of the Street* as it relates to crime (Anderson 1999).

### Participant and Nonparticipant Observation

There are two major types of observational methods. One is **participant observation**, in which the researcher actually plays a role, usually a minor one, in the group or setting being observed. A participant observer might play poker



Participant Observation



## Robert Park and “Scientific Reporting”

Robert Park (1864–1944), who coauthored the first real textbook on sociology, felt a strong need to work outside the academic world and thus started his career as a journalist. He said, “I made up my mind to go in for experience for its own sake, to gather into my soul . . . all the joys and sorrows of the world” (Park [1927] 1973: 253). He particularly liked to wander around and explore the social world. For example, he wrote of “‘hunting down gambling houses and opium dens” (Park [1927] 1973: 254).

In his reporting, Park wrote about city life in vivid detail. He would go into the field, observe carefully, and then write up his observations. He called his method *scientific reporting*, which was essentially the kind of social research that later came to be called *participant observation*.

In 1898, at the age of 34, Park left the newspaper business and returned to school,

eventually completing his doctoral dissertation in 1904 at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Instead of taking an academic position, Park went to work for the Congo Reform Association. This was an organization dedicated to exposing the abuses and exploitation of the Congo by the Belgians. He then became secretary to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute.

Park joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago in 1914 and played a central role during its heyday. His use of the city as a kind of laboratory for his observational studies helped lead the Chicago department into a leadership position in what came to be known as urban sociology.

Park’s case demonstrates the close association between journalism and at least some forms of sociology. Throughout his life Park retained an interest in, and a passion for, the accurate description of social

life. However, he grew dissatisfied with journalism because it did not fulfill his intellectual needs. In contrast to journalism, sociology draws upon theory and uses more systematic methods of data collection and analysis to understand the social world. Park’s ability to use sociological methods to pursue his deep interest in reforming society and overcoming its ills, especially with regard to race relations, is an important reason to consider him a public sociologist.

### Think About It

How might journalism contribute to public sociology (recall Karl Marx’s early career, described in Chapter 2)? What are journalism’s limitations as input to sociology? Do you think blogs and social networks can make the same potential contributions as traditional journalism? Why or why not?

in Las Vegas with the people being studied, sell books on the sidewalk to watch what happens on a busy city street (Duneier 1999), or become a (quasi-)member of a gang (Venkatesh 2008). In one classic example of participant observation, a sociologist with tuberculosis methodically studied the hospital he was in, as well as the actions of doctors, nurses, and other patients (Roth 1963). In another, a sociologist studied hoboes by riding in freight cars and living in hobo jungles (Harper 1982). And in a third classic study, a sociologist researched gender segregation in the corporate world of the 1970s by, among other things, participating in group discussions and meetings at a major U.S. company (Kanter 1993). More recently, Barbara Ehrenreich (2008) worked in low-wage jobs (for example, as a waitress, hotel maid, housecleaner, nursing home aide, and Wal-Mart associate) to study the experience of low-wage work. She found that many of the women she studied, despite working extra hours, were unable to meet basic living expenses including housing, transportation, and food. (See the “Public Sociology” box above.)

The Discovery Channel’s TV show *Dirty Jobs* was essentially an informal exercise in participant observation.

The show’s star, Mike Rowe, was *not* a trained sociologist, and he was *not* trying to uncover the sociological aspects of the jobs he was studying, but he *was* a participant observer. In each episode, he actually did the job being examined—he was a participant—and he observed the workers as well as their dirty jobs. Among the jobs Rowe performed and observed were “turd burner,” owl vomit collector, baby chicken sexer, sheep castrator, rat exterminator, maggot farmer, diaper cleaner, and high-rise building window washer.

The second observational method is **nonparticipant observation**, where the sociologist plays little or no role in what is being observed. For example, sociologist Gary Fine (1987) observed Little League baseball without becoming a team member or participating in the baseball games. He was interested in learning about the organized and informal activities of young boys that helped them to become men. Fine’s observational research covered the spring and summer

**nonparticipant observation** A research method in which the sociologist plays little or no role in what is being observed.

activities of 10 Little League baseball teams in five different communities over a span of three years. His research included not just observation of actual games but also observation of the players in dugouts, at practice fields, and before and after games when adults were not around. While Fine did not play baseball with his research subjects, he did get to know the boys outside the baseball setting “when they were ‘doing nothing” (Fine 1987: 1). More recently, Fine (2010) did an observational study of meteorologists without working as one.

The *Real World* reality show, which began on MTV in 1992, can be seen as another example of nonparticipant observation. Of course, sociologists are not involved in this show, and the observation is not as systematic as it would be if it were a sociological study. The show is based on selecting a group of young people who have never met to live together in a house. The show takes place in a different city every year; in 2013, it was set in Portland, Oregon. Although a camera operator is there to record at least some of the group’s activities, no outsider is present in the house to participate in those activities. The “observers” are the viewing audience. They can be seen as amateur nonparticipant observers in the sense that they “study” interaction patterns and other sociological aspects of what goes on among the residents.

In reality, there are no firm dividing lines between participant and nonparticipant observation, and at times they blend imperceptibly into one another. The participant often becomes simply an observer. An example is the sociologist who begins with participant observation of a gang, hanging out with members in casual settings, but becomes a nonparticipant when illegal activities such as drug deals take place. And the nonparticipant observer sometimes becomes a participant. An example is the sociologist who is unable to avoid being asked to take sides or share opinions in squabbles among members of a Little League team or, more likely, among their parents.

### ASK YOURSELF

Do you think a participant observer risks becoming too close to the subject under study? Why or why not? What about a nonparticipant observer? How can sociologists conducting observational research avoid becoming too involved with subjects?

**ethnography** Observational research, often intensive and over lengthy periods, that leads to an account of what people do and how they live.

**global ethnography** A type of ethnography that is “grounded” in various parts of the world and that seeks to understand globalization as it exists in people’s social lives.

## Ethnography

At times sociologists are interested in an observational method traditionally associated with anthropology. **Ethnography** is the creation of an account of what a group of people do and the way they live (Adler and Adler 2012; Hammersley 2007), usually entailing much more intensive and lengthy periods of observation than traditional sociological observation. Researchers may live for years with the groups, tribes, or subcultures (such as gamblers) being studied.

Sociologists interested in a variety of topics advocate the use of ethnographic methods. This is especially true of those interested in the sociology of gender (see Chapter 10), because such methods can reveal much about the experiences of traditionally understudied and marginalized groups of women (for example, immigrant factory workers [Chin 2005], lap dancers [Colosi 2010], and ex-convicts [Opsal 2011]). Some suggest that the personal relationships that develop between researchers and subjects in ethnographic studies make it less likely that the power researchers exert over subjects will distort the results (Bourdieu 1992). Feminist researchers are especially intent on ensuring that study participants are not coerced and exploited in the research process.

Normally ethnographies are small in scale, microscopic, and local. Researchers observe people, talk to them, and conduct interviews with them over an extended period of time. Nevertheless, the ethnographic method has now been extended to the global level. For instance, Michael Burawoy (2000) argues that a **global ethnography** is the best way to understand globalization. This is a type of ethnography that is grounded in various parts of the world and seeks to understand globalization as it exists in people’s social lives—Burawoy and his colleagues “set out from real experiences . . . of welfare clients, homeless recyclers, mobilized feminists, migrant nurses, union organizers, software engineers, poisoned villagers, redundant boilermakers, and breast cancer activists in order to explore *their* global contexts” (Burawoy 2000: 341).

Three interconnected phenomena are central to the global ethnographies undertaken by Burawoy and others:

- Do people experience globalization as an external force? If so, is it a force to be combated or accepted?
- In what ways, if at all, do people participate in creating and furthering global connections?



Feminist Ethnography



Robert Park



## Netnography

The Internet is a social world. The basic concerns of sociology—communications, relationships, and groups—are key elements of the Internet. The most obvious aspects of the Internet of interest to sociologists are online discussion forums, as well as social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. Because of them, access to discussions, social relationships, and social groups has expanded. However, fundamental concepts (like norms), theories (like symbolic interactionism; see Chapter 2), and methods (especially observation) are much the same both online and offline. Not surprisingly, **netnography**, or an account of what transpires online, has become a highly relevant method for sociological research (Kozinets 2009; Turkle 1997, 2011).

Netnographers observe thousands of phenomena online. For example, a netnographer might join the online fan club of a world-famous rock star to learn something about the relationship between a star and her fans. The researcher might be able to interact directly with the fans and the star through a Twitter feed. Netnographers can also intently study the use of Facebook by activists, such as those in Egypt who engaged in the ultimately successful effort to overthrow longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011 (Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer 2013). Membership in this emerging online community gave researchers real-time access to ongoing global communication. When the

success in Egypt spawned popular social uprisings in other countries, researchers had the opportunity to study how newly emerging popular movements in one country can shape others.

Globalization, introduced in Chapter 1, is one subject that is far easier to study on the Internet than it is anywhere else (Kozinets 2002b). Instead of needing to be in several places around the world, netnographers who study globalization can do most, if not all, of their research from their computers. Many online communities are global in scope, are engaged in global communications, and generate global actions of various kinds (e.g., efforts to deal with the causes of climate change). A great attraction of these communities for the researcher is that they can be tapped into instantly, with relatively little effort, and at no cost. However, language barriers can be a problem. It is also important to remember that people in some parts of the world are unable to access the Internet very often, very well, or even at all. Their interests are not going to be well represented online.

Netnography, like all social research, raises ethical questions. For example, researchers who join an Internet community to observe its ongoing communications might not inform other members of the community that they have joined with the objective of studying it. Their motives are reasonable—not tainting the evidence—but their means may raise eyebrows. Such nonparticipant observers

have been called “lurkers.” This type of deception is more difficult in face-to-face groups where researchers see those they are deceiving on a regular basis. They must conceal this deception from other group members, perhaps while looking them straight in the eye.

One way of avoiding this ethical problem, at least to some degree, is to study the group’s archived material rather than its ongoing communication. (Another advantage of studying archived material is that there is no possibility that the presence of the researcher will affect the nature of the communication among participants.) However, studying the archives does not avoid all ethical problems. It is akin to researchers not revealing that they are surreptitiously examining the personal letters, photo albums, or diaries of the people they are studying. The netnographer would need to get consent from all members of an online community to be allowed access to the group’s archives. So although netnography is a relatively new tool in the researcher’s repertoire, it—like every other research method—has its ethical issues and drawbacks.

### Think About It

What kinds of sociological research questions do you think are best answered by netnography? Do you think people will change their online behavior if they know they are being observed? Why or why not?

- Do people work for or against processes that are global in scope?

Burawoy and his colleagues sought to answer these questions wherever in the world they undertook their studies.

One example of a global ethnography is a study of homeless people in San Francisco who are able to survive by recycling some of the things they find on the street (Gowan 2000). Many of the homeless are out of work, often because of the global economic changes that have led many jobs to be outsourced to other countries. There are other linkages to globalization: For instance, at least some of the objects the homeless recycle may have been produced outside the United States; once they are recycled, those objects may once again find their way into new commodities that come to be distributed globally.

Another of Burawoy’s colleagues looked at nurses in Chicago who were originally from India and examined their place in the transnational community of nurses (George 2000). Concerns here might be American-born nurses who have lost their jobs as a result of the availability of qualified nurses from all over the world or who are unable to find jobs because the positions are being occupied by Indian nurses. There is the issue of the communication linkages between Indian nurses in the United States and those back home in India. Then there is the degree to which those linkages are used to bring still more Indian nurses to the United States.

## INTERVIEWS

While observers often interview those they are studying, they usually do so very informally and on the spur of the moment. Other sociologists rely mainly, or exclusively, on **interviews** in which information is sought from participants (respondents) by asking a series of questions that have been spelled out, at least to some degree, before the research is conducted (Gubrium et al. 2012). Interviews are usually conducted face to face, although they can be done by phone and are increasingly being done via the Internet (Farrell and Peterson 2010; Fontana 2007). In addition, large-scale national surveys

**netnography** An ethnographic method in which the Internet becomes the research site and what transpires there is the sociologist’s research interest.

**interviews** A research method in which information is sought from participants (respondents) who are asked a series of questions that have been spelled out, at least to some degree, before the research is conducted.

are increasingly including interviews. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is known for its national surveys, but it also uses interviews in its National Health Interview Survey (Sirkin et al. 2011).

The use of interviews has a long history in sociology. One very early example is W. E. B. Du Bois’s ([1899] 1996) study of the “Philadelphia Negro.” A watershed in the history of interviewing in sociology was reached during World War II when large-scale interview studies of members of the American military were conducted. Some of the data from those studies were reported in a landmark study, *The American Soldier* (Stouffer et al. 1949). Similarly, a study of the effects of the “ideology of intensive mothering” was based upon in-depth interviews with mothers (Hays 1998). More recently, Allison Pugh (2009) interviewed and observed children and their families over a three-year period. Among other things, she found that parents tend to buy things for their children to help them to be better integrated into groups at school and in their neighborhood. Parents continue to do so even when declining economic circumstances make it more difficult for them to afford such purchases. Through these purchases, parents contribute directly to consumer culture; they help ensure that their children will become ever more deeply involved in that culture.

## Types of Interviews

The questions asked in an interview may be preselected and prestructured so that respondents must choose from a set of preselected answers such as *agree* and *disagree*. Or the interview can be more spontaneous, unstructured, and completely open-ended. The latter form is used by those who do observational research. An unstructured interview offers no preset answers; respondents are free to say anything they want to say.

*Prestructured interviews* are attractive when the researcher wants to avoid any unanticipated reactions or responses from those being studied. In a prestructured interview, the interviewer attempts to

- behave in the same way in each interview;
- ask the same questions using the same exact words and in the same sequence;
- ask closed-ended questions that the participant must answer by choosing from a set of preselected responses;



Interviews





Interviewing is a venerable technique that remains both effective and popular. Here, Oprah Winfrey interviews Lance Armstrong. How would a sociologist approach this interview differently than a television host?

- offer the same explanations when they are requested by respondents; and
- not show any kind of reaction to the answers, no matter what they might be.

Interviews conducted in this way often yield information that, like data obtained from questionnaires, can be coded numerically and then analyzed statistically.

There are problems associated with prestructured interviews. First, interviewers often find it difficult to live up to the guidelines for such interviews:

- They are frequently unable to avoid reacting to answers (especially outrageous ones).
- They may use different intonation from one interview to another.
- They may change the wording, and even the order, of the questions asked (which can affect respondents' answers).

Second, respondents may not respond accurately or truthfully. For example, they may give answers that they believe the interviewer wants to hear. Third, and most importantly, closed-ended questions limit the responses, possibly cutting off important, unanticipated information that might be provided in a more free-flowing interview.

The last problem is solved by the use of open-ended or *unstructured interviews*. The interviewer begins with only a

general idea of the topics to be covered and the direction to be taken in the interview. The answers in unstructured interviews offer a good understanding of the respondents and what the issues under study mean to them. Such understandings and meanings are generally not obtained from structured interviews. However, unstructured interviews create problems of their own. For example, they may yield so much diverse information that it is hard to offer a coherent summary and interpretation of the results.

### The Interview Process

Conducting interviews, especially those that are prestructured, usually involves several steps. The researcher does not simply make a list of questions and start asking them. Rather:

1. The interviewer must *gain access* to the setting being studied. This is relatively easy in some cases, such as when interviewing one's friends in the student union or at a local bar. However, access would likely be much more difficult if one wanted to interview one's friends in a sorority house or on the job. They might be less eager to talk to a researcher—to any outsider—in such settings. Some groups, such as the top executives of major corporations or the extremely wealthy, have the resources to insulate, or even isolate, themselves. They can be quite difficult for researchers to gain access to and thus may be underrepresented in sociological research.

2. The interviewer must often seek to *locate a key informant* (Brown, Bankston, and Forsyth 2013; Rieger 2007). This is a person who has intimate knowledge of the group being studied and is willing to talk openly to the researcher about the group. Key informants can help the researcher gain access to the larger group of respondents and verify information being provided by them. The latter is useful because interviewees may well provide erroneous, perhaps purposely erroneous, information. For example, in William F. Whyte's (1943) famous study of street corner society, a leader of the group, "Doc," served as Whyte's key informant. In Sudhir Venkatesh's (2008) study of a Chicago housing project and its gangs, his key informant was the gang leader "J. T." Of this relationship, Venkatesh (1994: 322) said, "In the course of my fieldwork I became dependent on the continual support of J. T." J. T. not only corrected Venkatesh's misinformation and

misinterpretations but also retained the right to delete information that might disclose his identity or that of his gang.

3. The interviewer must seek to *understand the language and culture* of the people being interviewed. In some cases this is very easy. For example, it is not a great problem for an academic interviewer to understand the language and culture of college students. However, it is more difficult if the academician interviews those with their own, very different language and culture. Examples might include interviews with members of motorcycle gangs or prostitutes in a brothel. In these kinds of cases, it is all too easy for the researcher to misunderstand or to impose incorrect meanings on the words of respondents.

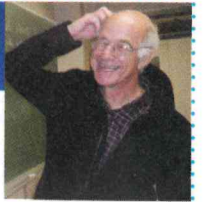
4. The researcher must *gain the trust of the respondents and develop a rapport* with them. Establishing trust and rapport can be easy or difficult, depending on the characteristics of the researcher. Feminist scholars would point out that well-educated and relatively powerful male researchers may intimidate less privileged female respondents. Older researchers may have trouble interviewing students. Former gang members may have trouble getting information from current members of a gang. In a few cases, trust and rapport need only be earned once, but in many cases, they need to be earned over and over. And trust can easily be lost. Venkatesh had to work constantly on his rapport with J. T., gang members, and many others who lived in the urban areas that he studied. In fact, J. T. thought at first that Venkatesh might be a cop, and he later confessed that he was never 100 percent sure that Venkatesh was not a policeman. Venkatesh was also in constant danger of losing the very tenuous trust his participants had in him and what he was doing. There was ever-present fear on the part of those he studied that he was in league with a rival gang or would inform on them to the police.

### ASK YOURSELF

Have you ever conducted or participated in an interview, perhaps for a job or as part of a study? How closely did it adhere to the guidelines mentioned here?

**survey research** A research methodology that involves the collection of information from a population, or more usually a representative portion of a population, through the use of interviews and, more importantly, questionnaires.

## BIOGRAPHICAL bits



### Michael Burawoy (British, born 1947)

Michael Burawoy is a professor and teacher of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, who has used participant observation to research workplaces in the United States, Hungary, Zambia, and Russia. An avowed Marxist, he was quoted in the *Village Voice* in 2001 as saying, "The dream of my life was to get a job in a steel mill in a socialist country." Burawoy has been a strong advocate of *public sociology*—sociology that seeks to reach public audiences outside the academy—as a way of broadening public dialogue about pressing social issues. Burawoy served as president of the American Sociological Association in 2003–2004 and is currently president of the International Sociological Association.

#### RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Why workers consent to conditions of exploitation
- How people experience globalization

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979)

#### KEY IDEAS & CONTRIBUTIONS

- Global ethnography is the best way to understand globalization
- Public sociology is a means of reaching audiences outside the academy

SOURCE: Jeff Byles, "Profile of the President. Tales of the Kefir Furnaceman: Michael Burawoy," *Footnotes* 21(7), 2003.

## SURVEY RESEARCH

**Survey research** involves the collection of information from a population, or more usually a representative portion of a population, through the use of interviews and, most importantly, questionnaires. While some sociologists do their own surveys, most rely on data derived from surveys done by others, such as the U.S. government (the U.S.



Michael Burawoy





This 1930 census taker uses a questionnaire to gather information. Have you ever responded to a questionnaire?

census, for example) and the National Opinion Research Center, which conducts various opinion polls.

Interviews, as we know, involve questions asked by the researcher in person, on the telephone, or via the Internet. Every two years the General Social Survey conducts face-to-face interviews with a large sample of Americans. In contrast, **questionnaires** are self-administered, written sets of questions. While the questions can be presented to respondents on a face-to-face basis, they are more often delivered to them by mail, asked over the telephone, or presented in a web-based format. Questionnaires are now increasingly being filled out on personal computers and over the phone (Snyder 2007).

### Types of Surveys

There are two broad types of surveys. The first is the **descriptive survey**, which is designed to gather accurate information about, for example, members of a certain group, people in a given geographic area, or people in a particular organization. A descriptive survey might gather

data on the level of sexual activity among college students, the employment status of Americans, or the way former Blockbuster employees are coping with job loss. The best-known descriptive surveys are those conducted by organizations, such as the Gallup Poll, which describes preferences, beliefs, and attitudes of a given sample of people.

In one example of descriptive survey research using the Internet, a survey was placed on a website designed to allow married people to find extramarital sexual partners. Based on a sample of more than 5,000 respondents, the data showed that females were more likely than males to engage in “sexting” (see Chapter 10) and that males and females involved in serious real-life relationships were about equally likely to engage in cheating on their partners both online and in real life (Wysocki and Childers 2011).

For many years, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has conducted a descriptive survey of high school seniors in the United States. One of the subjects has been marijuana use. As you can see in Figure 3.1, the prevalence of marijuana use among high school seniors has risen and fallen as if in waves. Marijuana use in this group peaked in 1979 (with over half of students admitting use of the drug), reached a low of 21.9 percent in 1992, and has generally been rising since then, although it has never again approached the 1979 level. In 2011, slightly less than 40 percent of 12th graders reported having used marijuana in the previous 12 months.

The data in Figure 3.2 are derived from descriptive surveys, but what if we wanted to explain, and not just statistically describe, changes in marijuana use among high school seniors? To get at this, we would need to do an **explanatory survey**, which seeks to uncover potential causes of, in this case, changes in marijuana use. For example, having discovered variations in marijuana use by high school students over the years, we might hypothesize that the variation is linked to students’ (and perhaps the general public’s) changing perceptions about the riskiness of marijuana use. Specifically, we might

**questionnaires** A self-administered, written set of questions.

**descriptive survey** A questionnaire or interview used to gather accurate information about those in a group, people in a given geographic area, or members of organizations.

**explanatory survey** A questionnaire or interview used to uncover potential causes for some observation.

hypothesize that as students (and the public) increasingly come to see marijuana as less risky, its use among students will go up. In this case, we would use the survey to learn more about respondents’ attitudes toward and beliefs about the riskiness of marijuana use and not simply measure student use of marijuana.

### Sampling

It is almost never possible to survey an entire population, such as all Americans, all students at your college or university, or even all fraternity members at that university. Thus survey researchers usually need to construct a **sample**, or a representative portion of the overall population. The more careful the researcher is in avoiding biases in selecting the sample, the more likely the findings are to be representative of the whole group.

The most common way to avoid bias is to create a **random sample**, a sample in which every member of the group has an equal chance of being included. Random samples can be obtained by using a list of, for example, names of all the professors at your university. A coin is tossed for each name on the list. Those professors for whom the toss results in heads are included in the sample. More typical and efficient is the use of random number tables, found in most statistics textbooks, to select those in the sample (Kirk 2007). In our example, each professor is assigned a number, and those whose number comes up in the random number table are included in the sample.

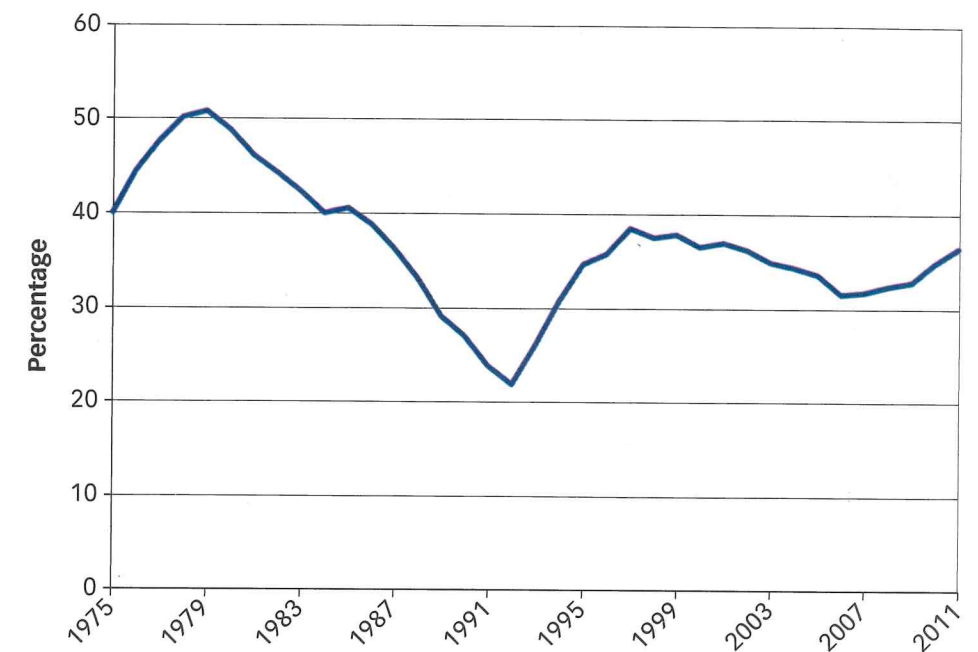
**sample** A representative portion of the overall population.

**random sample** A subset of a population in which every member of the group has an equal chance of being included.

**stratified sample** A sample created when a larger group is divided into a series of subgroups and then random samples are taken within each of these groups.

**convenience samples** A readily available group of people who fit the criteria for participating in a research project.

**FIGURE 3.1 • Marijuana Use among High School Seniors in the U.S., 1975–2011**



SOURCE: Adapted from Table 2: Trends in Annual Prevalence of Use of Various Drugs in Grade 12 in “Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth,” Ann Arbor, MI: Regents of the University of Michigan, 2012.

More recently, use is being made of computer-generated random numbers. Other sampling techniques are used in survey research as well. For example, the researcher might create a **stratified sample** in which a larger group is divided into a series of subgroups (e.g., assistant, associate, and full professors) and then random samples are taken within each of these groups. This ensures representation from each group in the final sample, something that might not occur if one simply did a random sample of the larger group. Thus random and stratified sampling are the safest ways of drawing accurate conclusions about a population as a whole. However, there is an element of chance in all sampling, especially random sampling, with the result that findings can vary from one sample to another. Even though sampling is the safest way to reach conclusions about a population, errors are possible. Random and stratified sampling are depicted in Figure 3.2.

Sometimes researchers use **convenience samples**, which avoid systematic sampling and simply include those who are conveniently available to participate in a research project. An example of a convenience sample might involve researchers passing out surveys to the students in their classes (Lunneborg 2007). These nonrandom



Sampling



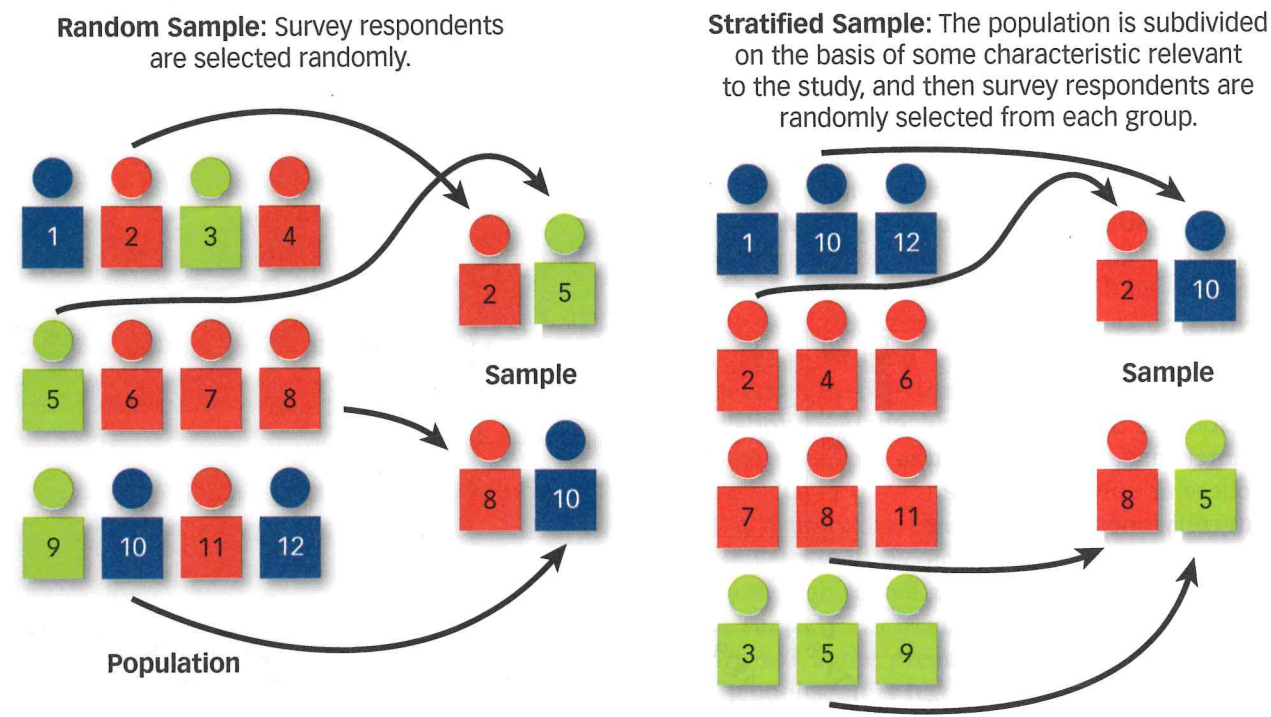
Survey on Use of Domestic Drones



Survey Flaws



**FIGURE 3.2 • Random Samples and Stratified Samples**



SOURCE: Reprinted with permission of Dan Kernler, Associate Professor of Mathematics, Elgin Community College, Elgin, IL.

samples are rarely ever representative of the larger population whose opinions the researcher is interested in knowing. Nonrandom samples therefore may create a substantial amount of bias in the researchers' results (Popham and Sirotnik 1973: 44). Many surveys that pop up on the Internet are suspect because the respondents are the people who happened to be at a certain website (which is likely to reflect their interests) and who felt strongly enough about the topic of the survey to answer the questions.

Research based on convenience samples is usually only exploratory. It is almost impossible to draw any definitive conclusions from such research. There are, however, some cases in which convenience sampling not only is justified but can be useful. For researchers trying to study elite social networks (such as political leaders or the wealthy), simply gaining access to the group can be a task in itself. Convenience sampling—surveying anyone to whom one is introduced—may be the only way to proceed (Tansey 2006). Convenience sampling also sometimes leads to larger, more scientific projects that rely on random or stratified samples.

## EXPERIMENTS

Sociologists do not do nearly as many experiments as do researchers in hard sciences like chemistry, or even

researchers in other social sciences such as psychology. However, some sociologists do perform experiments, and experimentation is one of the fundamental methods in the field (Schaefer 2012). An **experiment** involves the manipulation of one or more characteristics in order to examine the effect of that manipulation (Kirk 2007).

A sociological study by Devah Pager (2009) provides a good example of a sociological experiment. Pager was interested in how the background of a job applicant affects the likelihood of being called back for an interview. Pager randomly assigned fake criminal records to pairs of similar young men, one in each pair black and one white. Thus, in each pair, one person had a criminal record and one did not, and one was white and one was not. These young men then sent résumés to companies in Milwaukee, seeking entry-level jobs. One major finding of this experiment was that the young men believed to have a criminal record received a callback less than half as often as those of the same race believed not to have a criminal record. A second was that black men without

**experiment** The manipulation of a characteristic under study (an independent variable) to examine its effect on another characteristic (the dependent variable).

criminal records received callbacks at about the same rate as white men with criminal records.

In this experiment, we can clearly see the relationship between two important elements of an experiment: independent and dependent variables. In Pager's experiment, the **independent variable**, the condition that was manipulated by the researcher, was the job applicant's combination of race and criminal background. The **dependent variable**, the characteristic or measurement that resulted from the manipulation, was whether or not the applicant was called in for an interview.

There are several different types of experiments (Walker and Willer 2007):

- **Laboratory experiments.** **Laboratory experiments** take place in a controlled setting. The "laboratory" may be, for example, a classroom or a simulated environment. The setting offers the researcher great control over the selection of the participants as well as the independent variables—the conditions to which the participants are exposed (Lucas, Graif, and Lovaglia 2008). The famous experiments by Solomon Asch on conformity (see Chapter 5) were laboratory experiments. This type of experiment can be difficult to organize and sometimes yields artificial results. However, it allows for more accurate tests of research hypotheses.

- **Natural experiments.** **Natural experiments** are those in which researchers take advantage of a naturally occurring event to study its effect on one

**independent variable** In an experiment, a condition that can be independently manipulated by the researcher with the goal of producing a change in some other variable.

**dependent variable** A characteristic or measurement that is the result of manipulating an independent variable.

**laboratory experiment** Research that occurs in a laboratory, giving the researcher great control over both the selection of the participants to be studied and the conditions to which they are exposed.

**natural experiment** An experiment that occurs when researchers take advantage of a naturally occurring event to study its effect on one or more dependent variables.

**field experiment** Research that occurs in natural situations but allows researchers to exert at least some control over who participates and what happens during the experiment.

or more dependent variables. Such experiments offer the experimenter little or no control over independent variables (De Silva et al. 2010). For example, an occasion for a natural experiment developed during the Vietnam War when the U.S. Army instituted a lottery to select the young men who would be drafted. The men with low numbers in the lottery were drafted first; the men with high numbers had a good chance of not being drafted. The researchers had no control over the lottery or the young men's draft numbers (Walker and Willer 2007). Studying the effects of the lottery, they found that male students who had low draft numbers had more positive attitudes toward the Vietnam War than those with high numbers. The young men with low numbers expected to be drafted, but those with high numbers did not and were more likely to feel wronged if they were actually drafted. The researchers also found that those with low draft numbers had higher long-term mortality rates outside the military than those who had higher numbers. The researchers hypothesized that this was the case because the young men with low numbers were more likely to suffer stress associated with knowing that they were going to be drafted and thus had a greater likelihood of fighting and perhaps dying in the war.

- **Field experiments.** In some natural situations, researchers are able to exert at least some control over who participates and what happens during the experiment (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Pager and Western 2012). These are called **field experiments**. One of the most famous studies in the history of sociology is the "Robbers Cave" field experiment (Sherif et al. [1954] 1961), so called because it took place in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. The researchers controlled important aspects of what took place at the site. For example, they were able to assign the 22 boys in the study into two groups, called the Rattlers and the Eagles. The researchers were also able to create various situations that led to rivalry, bickering, and hostility between the groups. At the end of the experiment, they had each group rate the other: 53 percent of ratings of the Eagles were unfavorable, while nearly 77 percent of ratings of the Rattlers were unfavorable. Later, the researchers introduced conditions that they hoped would reduce bad feelings and friction between the groups. In fact, greater harmony between the groups was created by having them work together on tasks like securing needed water and paying collectively and equitably for a movie that everyone wanted to see. By the end of the latter part of the experiment, just 5 percent of the ratings of the Eagles



Experiments



### CHECKPOINT 3.3

### RESEARCH METHODS IN SOCIOLOGY

Observation	Systematically watching, listening to, and recording what takes place in a natural setting over time; may be participant or nonparticipant research.
Ethnography	Creation of an account of what a group of people do and how they live; type of observational research.
Interview	Collection of data via a series of questions, often asked face to face but sometimes by phone or online; may be prestructured or unstructured.
Survey	Collection of information from a sample of the population through interviews and questionnaires.
Experiment	Manipulation of one or more variables to examine their effect; may be a natural, laboratory, or field experiment.

were unfavorable, and unfavorable ratings of the Rattlers had dropped to 23 percent.

Some observers see a bright future for experimentation in sociology, in part because of its growth in neighboring fields such as psychology and especially in fields like economics and political science that in the past did not do much experimentation. Another reason is the potential for using the Internet as a site for sociological experiments (Hanson and Hawley 2010). In one Internet-based experiment, male respondents were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of digitally altered pictures of females on the basis of their perception of the women's body mass index (BMI)—in other words, on how overweight the women appeared to be. One finding was that respondents who were overweight were less likely to report differences in the attractiveness of the women on the basis of the women's BMI (Conley and McCabe 2011).

### SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

All of the methods discussed thus far involve the collection of new and original data, but many sociologists engage in **secondary data analysis** in which they reanalyze data collected by others. Secondary analysis can involve a wide variety of different types of data, from censuses and surveys to historical records and old transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Until recently, obtaining and using some of these secondary data sets was laborious and time-consuming. Today, however, thousands of data sets are available on the web, and they can be accessed with a few keystrokes. A number of websites provide both the data sets and statistical software for looking at them in different ways (Schutt 2007).

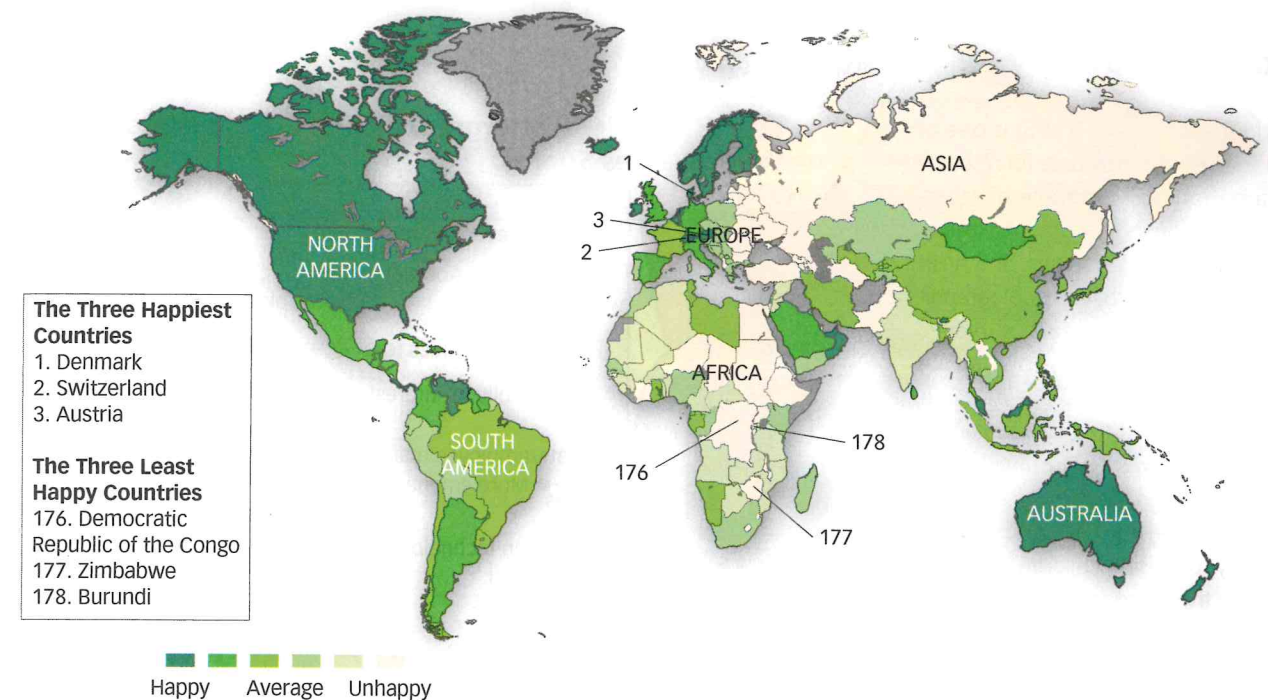
Secondary analysis very often involves statistical analysis of government surveys and census data. The

technique has a long history in sociology, extending back to Karl Marx analyzing government statistics at the British Library. The U.S. census data that are collected every 10 years—they were last collected for 2010—are a gold mine for sociologists both here and abroad. For example, a team of sociologists drew on 2000 census data to examine how the gender of managers in the workplace affects wage inequality and found that the presence of female managers did tend to reduce inequality (Cohen and Huffman 2007). Another team of researchers used census data, in combination with other administrative and survey data, to estimate the lifetime risk of imprisonment for members of different racial groups with varying levels of schooling (Petit and Western 2004). While there was a sizable difference in risk of imprisonment for blacks versus whites, their findings suggest that the level of education also greatly affects the risk of incarceration. For example, among the black men studied, 30 percent of those without a college education were in prison. However, almost twice as many high school dropouts—nearly 60 percent—went to prison.

It is not unusual for one body of data to lead to hundreds of secondary analyses. For example, the World Values Survey (WVS) (N.d.; see also the “Globalization” box on page 92) has been used to produce more than 400 research publications in more than 20 different languages. Some of this research has used the WVS to examine what social, cultural, and economic factors contribute to an individual's happiness. Figure 3.3 shows a “happiness map” among the citizens of various countries included in the surveys from 1999 to 2001. Another study examined data from 1981 to 2007 and found that perceptions of freedom of choice are more likely to lead to higher levels of happiness (Inglehart et al. 2008). However, subsequent research may look differently at the data and describe new parts of the puzzle. Using similar data from the WVS, another study looking at individual cases within countries demonstrated that inequalities in health quality, among other factors, also shape happiness (Ovaska and Takashima 2010). A study focusing on migration found that emigration rates were high in countries with both

**secondary data analysis** Reanalysis of data, often survey data, collected by others, including other sociologists.

FIGURE 3.3 • World Happiness: Rankings of 178 Countries



The World Happiness map is a global projection of subjective well-being based on a battery of statistical data, plus the subjective responses of 80,000 people worldwide, to map out well-being across 178 countries.

SOURCE: White, A. (2007). A global projection of subjective well-being: A challenge to positive psychology? *Psychtalk* 56, 17–20.

high and low levels of happiness, but the rates were low for countries in the middle (Polgreen and Simpson 2011). Yet another study that looked at the impact of different welfare systems concluded that people who live in liberal and conservative countries are at least twice as likely to be unhappy as people living in social democratic welfare states (Deeming and Hayes 2012).

Those who reanalyze data may be concerned about issues that differ from those that motivated the original research. For example, survey data that researchers at the University of Michigan collected on the prevalence of drug use among high school seniors (mentioned earlier in the chapter) were used to clarify differences in drug use between rural and urban areas (Cronk and Sarvela 1997). Indeed, data from the same University of Michigan survey, in conjunction with data from other studies, were used to test the hypothesis mentioned earlier and elaborate on the relationship between drug use patterns and the perceived risk of harm from drugs (Danseco, Kingery, and Coggeshall 1999).

While secondary analysis is far easier and far less expensive to carry out than collecting one's own data, especially large amounts of data, it has distinct

problems. For one thing, secondary researchers cannot refine their methods on the basis of preliminary research. For another, since others have chosen the methods of data collection, the data may not be ideal for the secondary researcher's needs. It is possible that the research may have to be abandoned until an appropriate data set is available or created. In some cases, researchers who find the data set inadequate for a study of their original interest may find that other relevant issues are covered better by the data. Another type of problem with using government data sets is political: Certain types of sensitive data may not have been collected. Or social or political changes may end the collection of certain types of data or change the way the data are reported or categorized. For instance, U.S. census data on race have changed over the years to accommodate changing demographics and sensitivities. The resulting inconsistencies in the data set over time can pose great difficulties for the secondary researcher.



World Values Survey



European Welfare State



## World Values Survey

The World Values Survey (WVS) is one of the main sources of survey data for research on globalization. It is a source of cross-cultural data on the impact of globalization on people's worldviews, values, and basic motivations. The WVS collects demographic data and asks people in each surveyed country roughly 250 questions about personal values and beliefs. For example, respondents are asked to prioritize various aspects of their lives, including family, politics, work, religion, and service to others. Respondents are queried about their responsibility for raising children as well as for protecting the environment. They are also asked whether they would be comfortable having some of the following live near them: criminals, people of a different race, Muslims, Jews, immigrants or foreign workers, those with AIDS, homosexuals, and drug addicts.

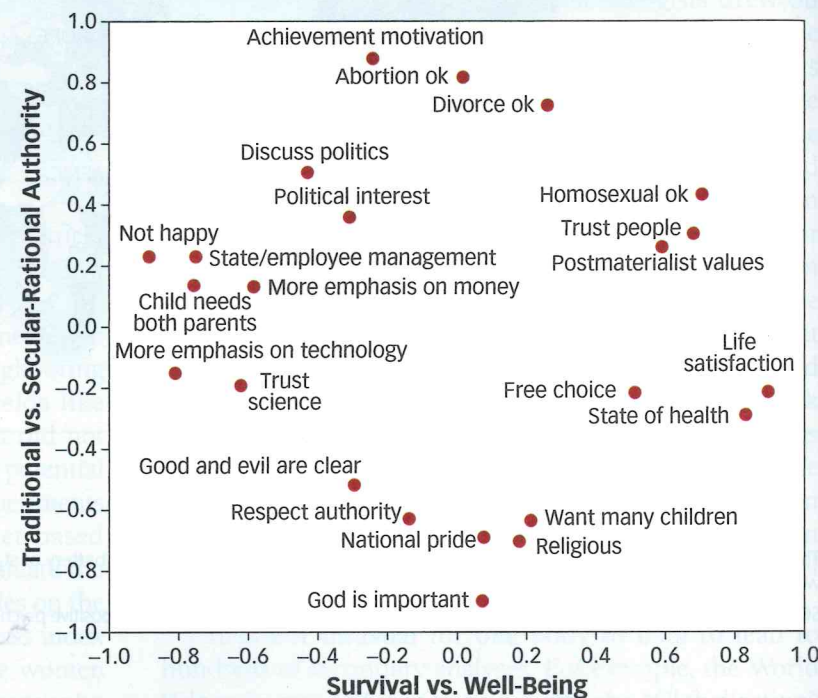
The WVS emerged out of the European Values Study, which, in its first wave in 1981, was limited to 20 highly developed European countries. Since then, the survey has expanded to 97 countries, covering nearly 90 percent of the population of the world. Since changes in values and preferences appear to be linked to level of economic and technological development, it was important to include societies across the entire range of development, from less developed (or industrial) to highly developed societies. This expansion also enabled the WVS to hire

native social scientists from many different countries. The result was more culturally conscious research design, analysis of data, and interpretation of results. The expansion of the project has also permitted the dissemination of advanced methods of social

analysis to developing societies in which such research is just emerging.

Sociologists have used data collected through the WVS for a wide variety of studies related to globalization. For instance, one study based on more than 20 years of

**FIGURE 3.4 • Scattergram of Global Values Measured in World Values Survey**



SOURCE: Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*. © 1997 Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

## HISTORICAL-COMPARATIVE METHOD

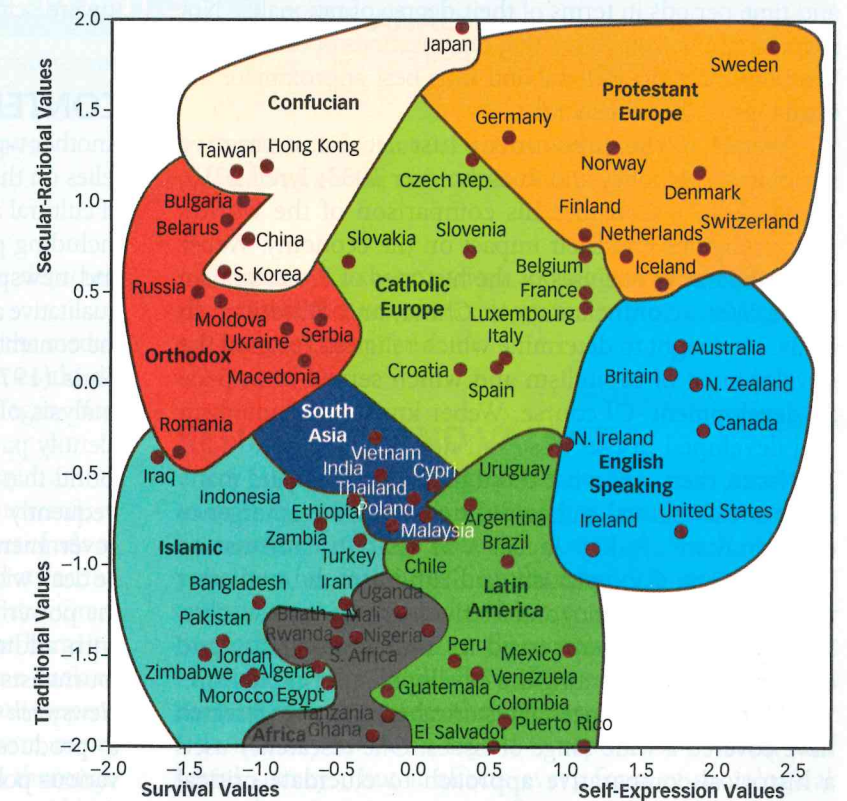
The goal of **historical-comparative research** is to contrast how different historical events and conditions in various societies have led to different societal outcomes. The hyphenation of *historical-comparative* makes it clear that two separable methods are being combined. The historical component involves the study of the history of societies, as well as of the major components of society such as the state, religious system, and economy. The addition of the comparative element, comparing the histories of two or more

societies, or of components of societies, makes it more distinctively sociological.

One of the things that differentiates history and historical-comparative sociology is the level of historical

**historical-comparative research** A research methodology that contrasts how different historical events and conditions in various societies (or components of societies) lead to different societal outcomes.

**FIGURE 3.5 • World Values Survey**



SOURCE: Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link Between Modernization and Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* June 2010, Vol 8, No. 2, p. 554. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

WVS data found that people in almost all industrial societies have generally shifted from being religious and traditional toward being more secular and rational (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Respondents who identify with religion emphasize family values and tend to be more conservative on such issues as gender roles, childbearing and child rearing, divorce, abortion, sexual norms, euthanasia, and suicide. They also have high levels of national pride; they tend to be nationalistic. Respondents with secular values exhibit contrary preferences on each of these topics. They are also often more tolerant and accepting of nontraditional social roles.

The other major dimension of global variation is the distinction between survival and self-expression values. Respondents in industrialized and developed countries have tended to have fewer worries about survival or about meeting their basic needs for food and shelter. As a result, their priorities have shifted from an emphasis on economic and physical security (i.e., survival) to an interest in well-being and personal happiness. With this greater self-expressiveness comes a greater tolerance of minorities—including foreigners, gays, and various ethnic groups—who might otherwise be found threatening. This increase in trust and tolerance creates the type of social environment that is most conducive to the development of democracy.

The scattergram shown in Figure 3.4 plots a variety of values along these two dimensions. For example, people who accept divorce rank toward the secular-rational end of the spectrum (toward the top of the vertical axis); those who respect

authority stand toward the traditional end (toward the bottom). Those who believe that a child needs both parents score toward the survival end of the horizontal dimension (toward the left side); those who express life satisfaction rank very high on self-expression (toward the right side).

The WVS has also been used to define *cultural zones* based on this spectrum of values. As you can see in Figure 3.5, the English-speaking world generally embraces

values that fall between traditional and secular-rational. But it ranks high on self-expression values, reflecting the relative well-being of its populace.

### Think About It

What other kinds of diversity among WVS social scientists would you recommend to the WVS, if any? Where would you place yourself on the scattergram? Do you believe that there really are such things as "world values"?

detail. Historians go into much more detail, and collect much more original historical data, than do sociologists. In contrast, sociologists are much more interested in generalizing about society than are historians. Perhaps the best way to exemplify the difference between a historical-comparative sociologist and a historian is in the concept of the ideal type (Clegg 2007; Weber [1921] 1968). An

**ideal type** An exaggeratedly rational model that is used to study real-world phenomena.

**ideal type**, to Max Weber ([1903–1917] 1949: 90), is a "one-sided *accentuation*" of social reality. Unlike the goal of the historian, an ideal type is not meant to be an accurate depiction of reality. Rather, it is designed to help us better understand social reality. It is a sort of measuring rod. Thus, for example, Weber developed an ideal type of bureaucracy, which accentuated its rational elements. He then used that



Financial Misconduct



ideal type to compare organizations in different societies and time periods in terms of their degree of rationality. Not surprisingly, he concluded that organizations of the modern West are the most rational and thus best approximate the ideal type of the bureaucracy.

Weber is the preeminent historical-comparative sociologist (Mahoney and Rueschmeyer 2003; Tyrell 2010; Varcoe 2007). Consider his comparison of the world's major religions and their impact on the economy. Weber did comparative analyses of the histories of Protestantism in the West, Confucianism in China, and Hinduism in India. He sought to determine which religions fostered the development of capitalism and which served to impede its development. Of course, Weber knew that capitalism had developed in the West and not in China and India. The issue, then, was what about these religions (and many other social factors) did or did not foster the emergence of capitalism. A key factor was that in contrast to Protestantism, Confucianism and Hinduism did not foster rationality and efficiency and a striving for material success. Sometimes, they even served to inhibit rationality and efficiency, thus preventing the development of capitalism.

More recent instances of historical-comparative research have covered a wide range of issues. One researcher used a historical-comparative approach to elucidate critical differences in the timing and character of modern pension systems developed in Britain, Canada, and the United States (Orloff 1993). This analysis highlights the role played by states and political institutions. Another researcher used historical-comparative research to elaborate four distinct kinds of states that developed in early modern Europe (Ertman 1997). Careful examination of the evidence from a number of earlier cases suggested that theories about state development based on war needed to be further refined. Although war remained an influence on the shape and character of European states, the long-standing structure of local government and the timing of geopolitical competition played even more important roles in explaining differences (see Kestnbaum 2012 for a recent review of work on the relationship between the state and war).

Some scholars have combined the use of other methods with historical-comparative analysis to generate important theoretical insights about more contemporary issues. Although we typically imagine the field of economics to be a uniform science throughout the world, Marion Fourcade (2009) shows us otherwise in her study of how the economics profession differs in France, Britain, and the United States. Fourcade used in-depth interviews with economists to supplement existing historical evidence in order to show how the profession has taken on distinctly different shapes in the three countries. Overall, she found that in France economics is more closely aligned with the state, in Britain it is more moral and oriented toward the

welfare of all, and in the United States it is more oriented toward science.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

Another type of secondary analysis, called **content analysis**, relies on the systematic and objective analysis of the content of cultural artifacts in print, visual, audio, and digital media, including photographs, movies, advertisements, speeches, and newspaper articles (Wolff 2007). The goal is to use qualitative and especially quantitative methods to understand the content of a message. In one well-known study, Herbert Gans (1979) did a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of news on television and in newsmagazines to identify patterns in the reporting of news. For example, he found that well-known people were dealt with much more frequently than unknowns. Among non-war-related stories, government conflicts and disagreements were more likely to be dealt with than government decisions. Gans supplemented the powerful insights that derived from his content analysis with additional participant observation research among journalists working at NBC and CBS news and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. This additional work enabled him to produce an incredibly rich and detailed account of the various political, commercial, and other forces that produce the values and informal rules that guide journalism.

Gans's content analysis took as its focus the overt content of the news, but it is also possible to use content analysis to get at hidden content. Since the time of Gans's pioneering study, other sociologists have used content analysis to do in-depth research on not only what is said in the news but also how the news is conveyed. Some researchers have explored micro-level aspects of news communication, including facial expressions, vocal inflections, and scene changes (Fields 1988). Others have studied bias in the way visual media portray presidential candidates (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Moriarty and Popovich 1989).

A group of researchers did a content analysis of female body images in the top rap videos on U.S. cable stations (MTV, BET, and VH1) (Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad 2010). They found that, overwhelmingly, the women in the videos were thin. When videos displayed a great deal of sex or materialism, they were even more likely to feature smaller female body sizes. However, when the videos included messages about political awareness, they were more likely to show women with larger body sizes. Other researchers did a content analysis of the number of times

**content analysis** Systematic and objective analysis of the content of cultural artifacts in print, visual, audio, and digital media, using both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

women appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* between 2000 and 2011 (Weber and Carini 2012). They found that despite their increasing participation in sports, women appeared on only 4.9 percent of the covers; the numbers did not change significantly over the period covered by the study, and in fact women were depicted on *more* covers between 1954 and 1965.

Content analysis is useful in areas other than the media. In the realm of consumption, for example, you could do a content analysis of ad campaigns for Las Vegas. You could find one set of ads from the 1990s that were part of a campaign to shift the appeal of Las Vegas away from its traditional emphasis on gambling and sex and toward, at least in part, spectacular entertainment. Another set of ads in the early twenty-first century was oriented toward attracting families to Las Vegas. Following the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, Las Vegas ads focused on the bargains available there. More recently, Las Vegas has gone back to its roots with a series of ads with the theme "What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas." Of course, there were many different ads during each of these periods, and a thorough content analysis of the ads, or a sample of them, would be necessary to reveal the degree to which ads in those periods adhered to the central theme. You might also contrast these themes with other possible themes. For instance, you might want to compare the way female bodies were depicted in advertisements during these eras. In any of these cases, you would systematically mine the existing artifacts and carefully and systematically analyze their content.

## ISSUES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The research conducted by sociologists raises a number of issues of great importance. Some are about how we should interpret the data that sociologists collect. Some are about the obligations that sociologists have to research participants and to society as a whole. Other issues are raised by sociologists themselves. As mentioned earlier, sociology is a multiple-paradigm science—with a full range

**reliability** The degree to which a given question (or another kind of measure) produces the same results time after time.

**validity** The degree to which a question (or another kind of measure) gets an accurate response, or measures what it is supposed to measure.

## CHECKPOINT 3.4

### METHODS OF SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Historical-comparative

Examines the way different historical events and conditions lead to different societal outcomes.

Content analysis

Analyzes the content of cultural artifacts to identify meaning and pattern.

of debates not only on various sociological perspectives but also on whether or not sociology can truly be as objective as a science is presumed to be.

## RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

A key issue with sociological data relates to one's ability to trust the findings. As a sociologist, you would want to be reassured that the data that you might use to further your own research, to formulate hypotheses, or to tell colleagues and the public about your research represent the social world as accurately as possible. As a consumer of research, you would do well to evaluate the methods used in order to assess their trustworthiness. This issue is frequently raised in regard to reports of political and social surveys, but it affects every form of sociological research.

Scientists talk about two dimensions of trustworthiness: reliability and validity. **Reliability** involves the degree to which a given question, or another kind of measure, produces the same results time after time. In other words, would the same question asked one day get the same response from the participants or the same measurement on the scale the following day, or week, or month? For instance, do those involved in your hypothetical study of Las Vegas gamblers give the same answers at various points in time to questions about whether or not they routinely lose money when gambling?

The other dimension of trustworthiness is **validity**, or the degree to which a question, or another kind of measure, gets an accurate response. In other words, does the question measure what it is supposed to measure? For example, suppose you asked gamblers, "When you leave Las Vegas, do you consider yourself a 'winner'?" You may be asking this question to find out whether they left Las Vegas with more money than the amount they had when they arrived there. However, they may interpret the question more broadly as asking about the total experience of being in Las Vegas. Thus, even though they have lost money, they might answer yes to the question because they had a great time and consider their losses as part of the price for having such an experience. A more valid question might be, "On balance, do you win more money than you lose while gambling in Las Vegas?"



## BIOGRAPHICAL bits

### Herbert Gans (American, born 1927)



Born in Cologne, Herbert Gans left Nazi Germany as a teenager, traveling to England and then the United States, where he became a citizen in 1945. He studied sociology at the University of Chicago and social planning at the University of Pennsylvania, earning a PhD. In the early 1950s, Gans worked as a social researcher and planner and remained a prominent consultant to government and public policy agencies throughout his career. A professor of sociology at Columbia University from 1971 to 2007, he continues to write and to participate in public discussions of social policy after his retirement.

#### RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Social planning and public policy
- Political, commercial, and other forces that produce the values and informal rules of journalism

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- *The Urban Villages* (1962)
- *The Levittowners* (1967)
- *Deciding What's News* (1979)
- *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1999)
- *Democracy and the News* (2003)

#### KEY IDEAS & CONTRIBUTIONS

- Content analysis helps reveal what makes the news
- Gans is thought to have been the first to introduce the term *public sociologist*, in his 1988 presidential address to the American Sociological Association

## RESEARCH ETHICS

**Ethics** is concerned with issues of right and wrong, the choices that people make, and how they justify them (Zeni 2007). World War II and the behavior of the Nazis helped make ethics a central issue in research. The Nazis engaged in horrendous medical experiments on inmates in concentration camps. They used them as human guinea pigs to study such things as the effects of hypothermia, high altitudes, low altitudes, hemorrhages, and the drinking of saltwater. In some studies, inmates were infected with such diseases as typhus, malaria, and hepatitis to test various vaccines and drugs. Acting on the pseudoscience of Nazi race ideology,

yet other doctors tried to develop efficient methods of mass sterilization of what the regime defined as inferior races (Spitz 2005; Korda 2006). This is the most outrageous example of a violation of the ethical code in the conduct of research, but it is certainly not the only one. Another well-known example is the research conducted between 1932 and 1972 at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama on 399 poor black American men suffering from syphilis. The researchers were interested in studying the natural progression of the disease over time, but they never told the participants that they were suffering from syphilis. Despite regular visits to collect data from and about the participants, the researchers did not treat them for the disease and allowed them to suffer over long periods of time before they died painfully (Reverby 2009).

A more recent issue of research ethics is the case of Henrietta Lacks (Skloot 2011). Lacks was a poor black woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951. Without her knowledge or consent, some of her tumor was removed. Cancer cells from that tumor live on today and have spawned much research and even highly successful industries. While those cells have led to a variety of medical advances, a number of ethical issues are raised by what happened to Lacks and subsequently to her family. For example, should the tumor have been removed and cancer cells reproduced without Lacks and her family knowing about, and approving of, what was intended? Would the procedures have been the same if Lacks were a well-to-do white woman? Finally, should Lacks's descendants get a portion of the earnings of the industries that have developed on the basis of her cancer cells?

No research undertaken by sociologists has caused the kind of suffering and death experienced by the people studied in Nazi Germany or at Tuskegee Institute, or even generated an ethical firestorm like the one raging around the Lacks case. Nonetheless, such research is the context and background for ethical concerns about the harmful or negative effects of research on participants in sociological research (the code of ethics of the American Sociological Association can be found at [www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm)). There are three main areas of concern: physical and psychological harm to participants, illegal acts by researchers, and deception and violation of participants' trust. A final issue discussed here is the structure established to safeguard participants from these kinds of negative actions.

### Physical and Psychological Harm

The first issue, following from the Nazi experiments and Tuskegee studies, is concern over whether the research

**ethics** A set of beliefs concerning right and wrong in the choices that people make and the ways those choices are justified.

can actually cause participants physical harm. Most sociological research is not likely to cause such harm. However, physical harm may be an unintended consequence. In the Robbers Cave research, discussed earlier as an example of a natural experiment, competition and conflict were engendered between two groups of 12-year-old boys. The hostility reached such a peak that the boys engaged in apple-throwing fights and in raids on one another's compounds.

A much greater issue in sociological research is the possibility of psychological harm to those being studied. Even questionnaire or interview studies can cause psychological harm merely by asking people about sensitive issues such as sexual orientation, drug use, and experience with abortion. This risk is greatly increased when, unbeknownst to the researcher, a participant is hypersensitive to these issues because of a difficult or traumatic personal experience.

Some of the more extreme risks of psychological harm have occurred in experiments. The most famous example is Stanley Milgram's (1974) laboratory study of how far people will go when they are given orders by those in authority. This study was inspired by the discovery after World War II that Nazi subordinates went so far as to torture and kill innocent citizens if ordered to do so by their superiors. In the Milgram experiment, one group, the "learners," were secretly paid to pretend that painful shocks were being applied to them by the other group of participants, the "teachers," who were led to believe that the shocks they thought they were applying were very real. The researcher, dressed officially in a white coat and projecting an aura of scientific respectability, would order the teachers to apply shocks that appeared to be potentially lethal. The teachers did so even though the learners, who were in another room and not visible, were screaming with increasing intensity. The research clearly showed that if they were ordered to do so by authority figures, people would violate the social norms against inflicting pain on, and even possibly endangering the lives of, others.

*Compliance* is a 2012 movie based on Milgram's work. It deals with a real-life case in which a caller identified himself as a police officer investigating a theft at a McDonald's restaurant. He was able to convince the store manager to, among other things, allow a young girl working there to be strip-searched and sexually violated.



This photo shows participants in the infamous Tuskegee Institute research on syphilis, which did not include informing or treating several hundred poor black men who suffered from the disease and eventually died. How would such a disease likely be studied today?

The results of the Milgram experiment (as well as events depicted in the movie) are important in many senses. We are concerned here with what the study did to the psyches of the people involved in the study. For one thing, the "teachers" came to know that they were very responsive to the dictates of authority figures, even if they were ordered to commit immoral acts. Some of them certainly realized that their behavior indicated that they were perfectly capable in such circumstances of harming, if not killing, other human beings. Such realizations had the possibility of adversely affecting the way participants viewed, and felt about, themselves. But the research has had several benefits as well, for both participants and others who have read about the Milgram studies. For example, those in powerful positions can better understand, and therefore limit, the potential impact of their orders to subordinates, and subordinates can more successfully limit how far they are willing to go in carrying orders out.

Another famous study that raises similar ethical issues was conducted by Philip Zimbardo (1973). (The 2010 movie *The Experiment* is a fictionalized depiction of this experiment.) Zimbardo set up a prisonlike structure called "Stanford County Prison" as a setting in which to conduct his experiment. Participants were recruited to serve as either prisoners or guards. The "prison" was very realistic, with windowless cells, minimal toilet facilities, and strict regulations imposed on the inmates. The guards had



Social Sciences and War



Research Ethics





By letting his subjects believe they were harming other subjects with electric shocks, Stanley Milgram attempted to learn how the Nazis were able to carry out torture and killings. Do you think most people would comply with an authority figure's orders?

uniforms, badges, keys, and clubs. They were also trained in the methods of managing prisoners.

The experiment was supposed to last six weeks, but it was ended after only six days. The researchers feared for the health and the sanity of those acting as prisoners. Some of the guards insulted, degraded, and dehumanized the prisoners. Only a few guards were helpful and supportive. However, even the helpful guards refused to intervene when prisoners were being abused. The prisoners could have left. However, they tended to go along with this situation, accepting both the authority of the guards and their own lowly and abused position. The ethical issues in this case are similar to those raised by the Milgram research. Some of the guards experienced psychological distress, but it was worse for the prisoners when they realized how much they had contributed to their own difficulties. Social researchers learned that a real or perceived imbalance of power between researcher and participant may lead the participant to comply with a researcher's demands even though they cause distress. However, as in the case of Milgram's research, the Zimbardo research yielded positive by-products, such as a greater understanding of how those put in guard positions may lose their humanity and how submissive prisoners can become.

### ASK YOURSELF

Are there any other ways to answer the questions Milgram and Zimbardo explored? How would you tackle these questions as a social scientist?

### Illegal Acts

In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, a researcher might witness or even become entangled in illegal acts. This problem often confronted Venkatesh (2008) in his research on gangs in and around a Chicago housing project. He frequently witnessed illegal acts such as drug use, drug sales, and prostitution. As we saw above, from the beginning he was suspected of being a police informant. Had he informed the police about the illegal acts he witnessed, he would likely have compromised his ability to continue his research. In not informing the police, he was forced to live with the fact that his silence was, at the minimum, not serving to reduce such illegal behavior.

In other cases, the researcher must weigh sticky legal and ethical ramifications for participants. In one

study of children in a nursery, the researchers witnessed an illegal act (Anspach and Mizrahi 2006). They had to decide whether or not to report it. The researchers had to juggle concerns about the criminality of the act with a desire to protect their research participants and the trust they had extended. Other concerns lingered in the background. Publishing an account of such a dramatic act might help the researchers' careers, but it might also send the perpetrator of the illegal act to jail. It was also possible that not informing the police, or refusing to turn over field notes, could lead to imprisonment for the researchers (Emerson 2001; Van Maanen 1983).

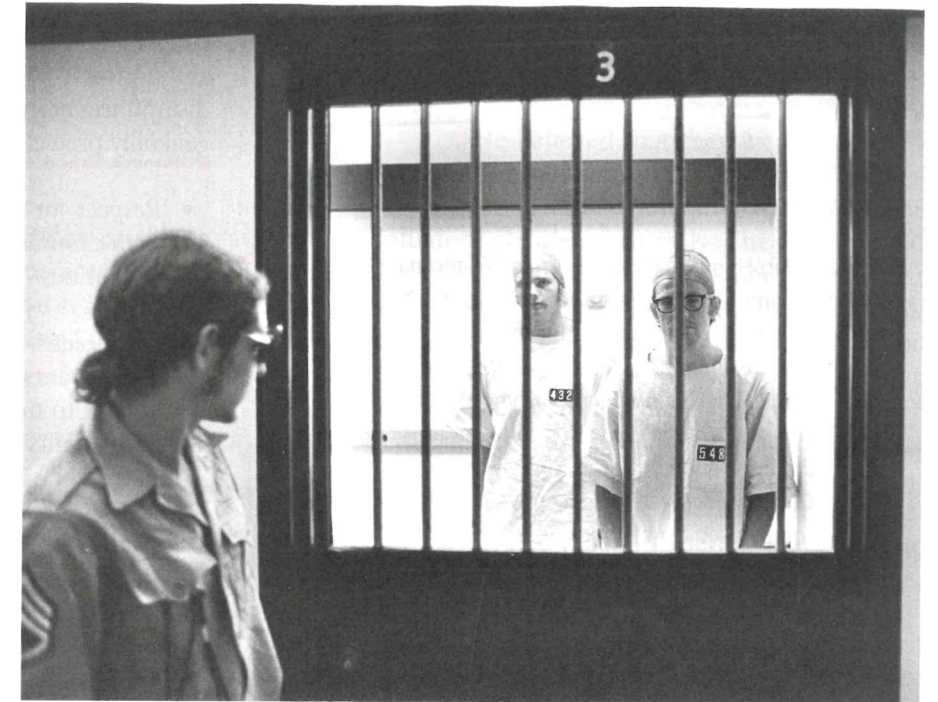
### The Violation of Trust

There are several ways that researchers can betray participants' trust in the research enterprise. For instance, the researcher might inadvertently divulge the identity of respondents even though they were promised anonymity. There is also the possibility of exploitative relationships, especially with key informants. Exploitation is of special concern in cases where there is a real or perceived imbalance of power—often related to race, class, or gender—between researcher and participant. In the Tuskegee case, for example, African American men suffered the adverse effects of the research even though syphilis is distributed throughout the larger population. Although this research should not have occurred under any circumstances, a more equitable research design would have meant that most of the participants were white males.

It is also a betrayal of trust for the researcher to develop inappropriate relationships with participants. One noteworthy example of this latter point is a study conducted by Erich Goode (2002) to better understand the stigma of obesity. He has publicly acknowledged that he had sexual relations with some of his female informants. Goode argues that because of this he was able to obtain information that may not have been obtainable by any other means. However, one must ask about the cost to his participants of obtaining the knowledge in this way. One can only imagine how his participants felt when some of them discovered that Goode had an ulterior motive in having an intimate relationship with them. Many of his participants were already very sensitive about their body image and their relationships with men. Because Goode's participants did not have full knowledge of his motives, they were unable to make informed choices about engaging in sexual relations with him. In this case, the power imbalance between researcher and participant led to exploitation.

The best known example of sociological research involving deception and intrusion into people's lives is Laud Humphreys's (1970) study of the homosexual activities of men in public restrooms (*tearooms*). Humphreys acted as a lookout outside tearooms and signaled men involved in anonymous acts of fellatio when members of the public or the police were approaching. He interviewed some of the men involved with full disclosure. However, he also noted the license numbers of some of those he observed and tracked down their addresses. Humphreys appeared at their homes a year or so later, in disguise, to interview them under false pretenses. There he uncovered one of the most important findings of his study: Over half of the men were married, with wives and families. They were involved in the tearoom trade not because they were homosexual but because sexual relations in their marriage were problematic.

Humphreys deceived these men by not telling them from the outset that he was doing research on them or, with those he interviewed under false pretenses, the true nature of the research. His research had at least the potential of revealing something that most of the participants wanted to conceal. He later admitted that if he had the chance to do the research over again, he would tell the participants about his true role and goal. But the research itself is not without merit. It helped to distinguish between homosexual



Philip Zimbardo's experimental re-creation of prison conditions was so realistic, and the participants were so severely affected by their assigned roles, that the experiment was cut short by several weeks. Should this early cutoff have invalidated the research?

acts and homosexual identity. Also, homosexuals had very difficult lives in the early 1970s. Nearly half of his participants were covertly bisexual or homosexual and faced numerous difficulties, if not danger, if they "came out." Thus, there were very strong reasons for them to keep their homosexual activity hidden. Many of these men also experienced considerable stress in trying to live as married men while simultaneously engaging in impersonal homosexual activity with strangers. Humphreys's research provided some much-needed insight into their lives.

### INFORMED CONSENT AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

Various ethical codes have been devised to protect people from overzealous or malicious researchers. The Hippocratic Oath taken by medical doctors offers helpful guidelines for dealing with human participants. The Nuremberg Code was developed in 1947 to protect biomedical research subjects after the Nazi experiments on concentration camp inmates were revealed. Codes like these were later broadened to a concern for all research involving human participants. Such ethical codes have helped to protect



Methodology and Ethics



Laud Humphreys



## BIOGRAPHICAL bits



### Laud Humphreys (American, 1930–1988)

Robert Allen Humphreys was born in Oklahoma and took the name *Laud* when he was baptized in the Episcopal Church. He graduated from a theological seminary and served as an Episcopal priest before receiving a PhD in sociology at Washington University. He became a sociology professor and later a psychotherapist and consultant on gay and lesbian issues. Controversy over the deceptive research methodology used for his book *Tearoom Trade*, originally his doctoral dissertation, nearly cost him his PhD. Married for 20 years with two adopted children, Humphreys came out as gay at the 1974 meeting of the American Sociological Association and founded the Sociologists' Gay Caucus. The marriage ended in 1980. Humphreys's work helped launch queer theory (Chapter 2) and increase sociological interest in the difference between public and private selves.

#### RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Homosexual activities of men in public restrooms ("tearooms")

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- *Tearoom Trade: A Study of Homosexual Encounters in Public Places* (1970)
- *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (1972)

#### KEY IDEAS & CONTRIBUTIONS

- Homosexual acts do not define a homosexual identity

research participants, but it is important to realize that they are only codes of conduct and not enforceable laws and regulations.

Following revelations of the Tuskegee experiments, the U.S. Congress passed the 1974 National Research Act. It required ethical oversight for research funded by the federal government. Since then, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has required that all research in the United States receiving federal funding be approved by an institutional review board (IRB) (Corwin and Tierney 2007). (In the United Kingdom and Australia, research ethics committees, or RECs, serve a similar purpose.) IRBs are designed to deal with the issue of deception in social research

and the harm that social research can do to participants. Universities have their own IRBs, and committee members are typically faculty members from a wide variety of disciplines, along with members of the community. IRBs generally protect three broad ethical principles:

- *Respect for persons.* Participants—especially those with diminished capacities such as physical or mental disabilities—are to be treated with dignity and respect.
- *Beneficence.* As little harm as possible is to be done to participants, and every effort is to be made to be of benefit to them. However, there are exceptions where the benefits of the research are overwhelming and the harm to be done is unavoidable.
- *Justice.* Research should operate on the principle of justice so that burdens and rewards are distributed in an equitable manner.

Of particular importance is that most IRBs require evidence of written **informed consent** of those being studied. Typically, researchers present a statement for participants to sign that ensures informed consent. It includes such details as

- what the study entails and why it is being conducted,
- how and why research participants have been recruited to participate,
- what participation involves,
- the risks and benefits associated with participation,
- the degree to which participants' privacy and confidentiality will be protected,
- how the study safeguards vulnerable populations (such as children, prisoners, and the impaired), and
- who the participants can contact at the university if they have further questions.

Participants have a right not only to be aware that they are being studied but also to know about the potential harms and benefits that they might experience in the course

**informed consent** Agreement by participants in social research that they understand and accept the true nature and purpose of the study and any sensitive or dangerous aspects of the research.

of the research. Research that does not have such consent, and more importantly that poses dangers to participants, is likely to be turned down by IRBs unless it is justified by extraordinary reasons.

### ASK YOURSELF

What other facts, if any, do you think should be part of an informed consent document? Have you ever participated in an experiment as a subject, and if so, were you told everything you wanted to know before you agreed to participate?

In addition to the statement for participants, researchers submit a research protocol that provides an overview of the way in which the research will be conducted. For example, if the research is interview based, the protocol might specify that the interviewer will first provide the participant with an introduction to the research and a review of the participant's role in the research, show him or her the informed consent form that will be signed by participants, and provide a basic script of the questions that will be asked during the interview. IRB committees then review these materials and decide whether the proposed research plan should be approved, modified, or disapproved.

### OBJECTIVITY, OR "VALUE-FREE" SOCIOLOGY

Another issue relating to sociological research is whether or not researchers have been, or can be, objective. That is, do they allow personal preferences and judgments to bias their research? Many argue that value-laden research jeopardizes the entire field of sociology. The publication of such research, and public revelations about those biases, erode and could destroy the credibility of the field as a whole. In the history of sociology, this discussion is traceable, once again, to the work of Max Weber. Taken to its extreme, *value-free sociology* means preventing all personal values from affecting any phase of the research process. However, this is not what Weber intended in his work on values, and it is instructive to take a brief look at what he actually meant.

Weber was most concerned with the need for teachers, especially professors, to be value free in their lectures. This issue arose in Weber's day in Germany, at least in part because of the growing number of Marxist-oriented teachers. Many of them wished to use the classroom to express Marxist ideology and to raise the consciousness of students about the evils of capitalism. They may even have wanted to foment revolution against the capitalist system. Weber was opposed to

Marxism, but he was also more generally opposed to using the classroom to express any values. He took this position because he felt that young students were neither mature nor sophisticated enough to see through such arguments. He believed that they were also likely to be too intimidated by the position of their professors, especially in the authoritarian Germany of his day, to be able to evaluate their ideas critically. The idea of, and the need for, value freedom in the classroom seems clear and uncontested. However, we must realize that all professors, like all other human beings, have values. Therefore, the best we can hope for is for them to strive to be as objective as possible in the classroom.

Weber did *not* take the same position with reference to research. In fact, he saw at least two roles for values in social research. The first is in the selection of a question to be researched. In that case, it is perfectly appropriate for researchers to be guided by their personal values, or the values that predominate in the society of the day. The second is in the analysis of the results of a research study. In that analysis, sociologists can, and should, use personal and social values to help them make sense of their findings. These values are an aid in interpretation and understanding. However, they are not to be used to purposely distort the findings or mislead the reader of a report on the study.

In Weber's opinion, the only place in research to be value free is in the collection of research data. This is a rather unexceptional argument meaning that researchers should do everything they can to prevent bias in the data collection process. Few, if any, observers would accept the opposing position that it is perfectly acceptable to engage in such distortions. Such a position would undermine all research and the scientific status and aspirations of sociology.

Some sociologists, especially feminist and critical scholars (Reid 2004), question whether even this limited attempt to conduct value-free research is possible. In a famous essay, Alvin Gouldner (1962) argued that value-free sociology is a myth. Even when researchers strive to be completely objective, they carry with them their own experiences, assumptions about the world, and personal biases that inevitably shape the ways in which they approach their research and collect their data. The fact that women and people of color were largely overlooked by social researchers until relatively recently is an example of how an unquestioned assumption—the belief that the experiences of men and women or of people of color and whites are all the same—can be problematic. For this reason, many scholars (such as Bourdieu 1992) argue that researchers should be extremely reflective and explicit about their own social position and how that might influence the research process.



## ACTIVE SOCIOLOGY

### Have You Voted Today?

Have you ever responded to an online poll or survey? How is this kind of survey similar to and different from scientific research? Facebook contains a feature called “Ask a Question,” where you can poll your friends about a specific topic. Go to Facebook and create a question about a current issue. Construct four or five preselected responses, post your question, and collect the data in a few days. Then answer the following questions and share your responses with the class.

1. How many people responded?
2. What trends do you see in their responses?
3. Do *variables* like age or geographic location appear to have influenced the way people answered the question?
4. How is the research you completed similar to the scientific research you read about in this chapter?
5. How is it different?
6. What are some of the problems with collecting data in this way—particularly concerning issues of *reliability*, *validity*, *objectivity*, and *ethics*?

### CHECKPOINT 3.5 ISSUES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Reliability	The degree to which a given question or measure produces the same results each time.
Validity	The degree to which responses to questions and measures are accurate.
Ethics	Standards by which we judge right and wrong.
Objectivity	The absence of personal preferences and judgments that bias research.

In contemporary terms, what Weber argued for was an attitude of objectivity during the research process. But there is another kind of objectivity, *procedural objectivity*, which entails

reporting the research in such a way that any reader will understand how the research was conducted. As many details as possible should be reported to allow for outside assessment of the research. Among other things, details about sampling, the questions asked in interviews or on questionnaires, the statistical procedures employed, known limitations of the research, and so on should be made available in research reports. Other researchers can then, if they choose, repeat, or replicate, the study to see if they get the same results. The ability to replicate research is a hallmark of any science.

## SUMMARY

Sociologists apply the scientific method. First, a sociologist finds a question that needs to be answered, and then reviews the literature to see what has already been found. Next, the sociologist develops a hypothesis, chooses a research method, and collects data that can confirm, or fail to confirm, the hypothesis. Finally, the researcher analyzes the data in relation to the initial hypothesis. Sociology is a multiple-paradigm science, which means that no one model unifies all sociologists.

Sociologists use different research methods depending on the research question they are studying. Quantitative methods yield data in the form of numbers, and qualitative methods yield verbal descriptions. Observation consists of systematically watching, listening to, and recording what takes place in a natural social setting over some period of time. In interviews, respondents are asked a series of questions, usually on a face-to-face basis. Survey research collects data through interviews and

questionnaires. Experimentation, less common, manipulates one or more independent variables to examine their effect on one or more dependent variables.

Sociologists also often engage in secondary data analysis, in which they reanalyze data collected by others. Secondary data may consist of statistical information, historical documents and analyses, or the content of cultural artifacts and messages.

Reliability is the degree to which a given measure produces the same results time after time, and validity is the degree to which a measure

is accurate. Past problems with questionable research ethics have led to the development of institutional review boards (IRBs), which vet proposed projects before they are allowed to proceed. A key requirement is that researchers obtain informed consent from their respondents by explaining the true nature and purpose of the study and any sensitive or dangerous aspects of the research.

It is difficult to avoid bias altogether. However, clear and objective descriptions of research procedures will enable other researchers to evaluate and perhaps replicate them.

## KEY TERMS

content analysis, 94	ideal type, 93	quantitative research, 77
convenience sample, 87	independent variable, 89	questionnaire, 86
dependent variable, 89	inferential statistics, 78	random sample, 87
descriptive statistics, 77	informed consent, 100	reliability, 95
descriptive survey, 86	interview, 83	sample, 87
empiricism, 73	laboratory experiment, 89	scientific method, 73
ethics, 96	natural experiment, 89	secondary data analysis, 90
ethnography, 81	netnography, 82	statistics, 77
experiment, 88	nonparticipant observation, 80	stratified sample, 87
explanatory survey, 86	observation, 79	survey research, 86
field experiment, 89	paradigm, 75	validity, 95
global ethnography, 81	participant observation, 79	
historical-comparative research, 92	qualitative research, 77	

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What steps do researchers take when applying the scientific method? How would you apply the scientific method to get answers to a question you have about the social world?
2. What does it mean to say that sociology is a multiple-paradigm science? What are the benefits and disadvantages of a multiple-paradigm science?
3. What are the differences between participant and nonparticipant observational methods? How do sociologists ensure that their observations are systematic using both approaches?
4. What is the key value of conducting ethnographic research? How would a global ethnography help you to make sense of your own place in the world?
5. Researchers use interviews to gather data by asking individuals a series of questions. How do researchers choose between prestructured and unstructured interviews? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of interview?
6. Why do sociologists who conduct surveys rely on samples? What techniques do researchers use to avoid biases in their samples?
7. A researcher uses the World Values Survey to examine the relationship between people's religious beliefs and their level of happiness. In this study, what is the independent variable, and what is the dependent variable? What reliability and validity issues could arise in conducting this survey across countries?
8. Some experiments allow researchers to take advantage of a naturally occurring event to study its effect on one or more dependent variables. Can you think of any recent events that might have been conducive to natural experiments? What would be the dependent variable or variables in your example?
9. What are some ethical concerns raised by sociological research? Use specific examples from research discussed in the chapter to describe these ethical concerns. How do IRBs help keep research ethical?
10. What role do values play in the research process? According to Weber, when is objectivity most important?



## APPLYING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

How can we use surveys to describe the attitudes of all college students at your school toward globalization? Construct a survey consisting of 10 questions to determine how much students know about globalization and the extent to which they think that globalization is positive or negative. Check the Internet for surveys conducted by other researchers and organizations to see what types of questions are commonly asked to

get at this sort of information. For your own survey, be sure to consider whether it will be structured or unstructured and whether it will be administered face to face, by mail, or over the web. How would you go about sampling students at your school? Why?

Once you have considered all of the above, take a convenience sample of five of your friends and administer the survey to them. What are your findings?

## STUDENT STUDY SITE



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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to say that sociology is a multiple-paradigm science? What are the benefits and disadvantages of a multiparadigm approach? How do you think you will benefit from this approach?

2. What are the differences between qualitative and quantitative research? How do sociologists ensure that their operations are systematic and that they avoid bias?

3. How do you think you will benefit from this approach?

4. How do you think you will benefit from this approach?

5. How do you think you will benefit from this approach?

