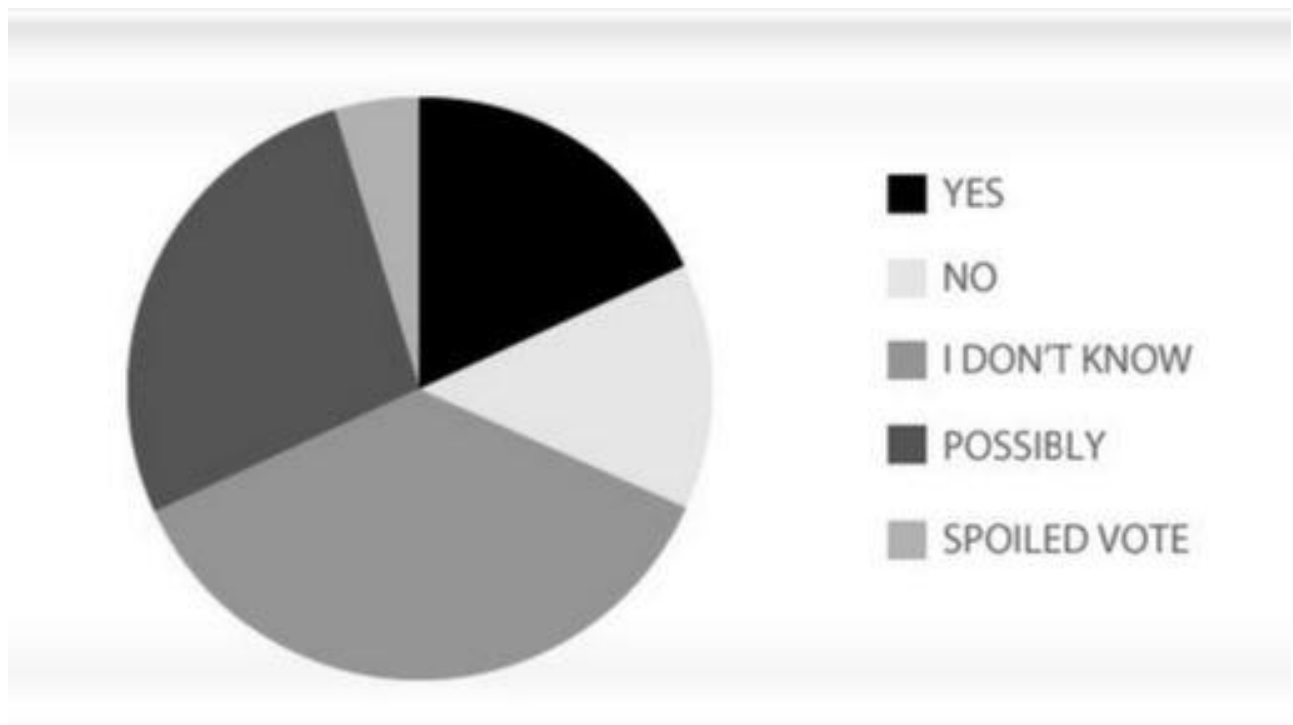# Research Methods

Shamus Khan, Columbia University
Gwen Sharp, Nevada State College

Research Methods

SHAMUS KHAN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
GWEN SHARP, NEVADA STATE COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

☐ How do we "know" things about the social world?

☐ What principles guide ethical research on people?

For decades, scholars knew that people who had served time in prison are much less likely to have a job than other people are. But we didn't exactly know why. The answer may seem obvious, but as it turns out, there are lots of possible answers. One is discrimination: perhaps employers just don't like people who were incarcerated. Or maybe convicted felons are somehow different than other job applicants. Maybe they like to break rules, so they end up getting fired. Perhaps they aren't very interested in working, so they don't search hard for jobs or quit more quickly if they don't like their coworkers. Perhaps they missed out on getting important training and skills while they were in prison, so they aren't as qualified as other job applicants.

Which explanation is correct? How would we know?

Devah Pager was a young graduate student when she studied this issue. She conducted an **audit study** to look for an answer.[1] She sent young people out in pairs to apply for the same jobs. She created fake resumes for them to use and kept everything about them the same except whether or nor not they

(*Source*)

had a criminal record for a non-violent drug offense (she also looked at how this worked for Black and White applicants; you'll learn more about that in a later chapter). The advantage of this method is that if everything about the applicants is carefully matched except one characteristic, then any differences you observe must be explained by the one thing that was different – in this case, whether applicants had a criminal history. And Pager found that it mattered: having a criminal record affected the applicants' chances of getting an interview. Even though their resumes were the same in terms of qualifications, the applicants who revealed their criminal record were less likely to be called back for an interview.

When Pager decided to use an audit study, she was following a particular **method** – a study design that allows us to systematically study the world and be relatively certain that we arrive at accurate conclusions. Sociology is a social science, and a critical aspect of any science is that there are agreed-upon ways to generate knowledge. This sets science apart from other ways of explaining the

world, such as common sense or religious faith. At the core of scientific methods is a particular research attitude: skepticism. No matter who makes a claim, and no matter whether it seems to make sense, the job of scientists is to be skeptical of the claim and to try to find problems with it.

The importance of being wrong

All scientific studies of the social world share a key feature: scholars work hard to find evidence that our conclusions are wrong. This may seem confusing; wouldn't we want to show that our conclusions are *right*? But this is how scientific knowledge advances: it's not enough to provide evidence that a claim is right; you must search for evidence that it's wrong. We're never absolutely certain that our claims about the social world are correct, but the more times we try to show that our claim is wrong and can't do it, the more comfortable we can be that our idea has some basis in fact. Whether we're testing subjects in a lab or wandering the hallways of a school observing its inner workings, the basic approach is the same: we look for other potential explanations for what we observe, or any evidence that our claim isn't accurate.

As you're introduced to sociology, you'll encounter studies that use a variety of methods to generate knowledge. The primary lesson we hope you come away with is to be skeptical. Research isn't about affirming your beliefs; it's about being unable to prove them wrong.

Research ethics

The most essential consideration of any research project should be the ethics of the research. Research ethics are important for all research, but they are particularly acute when you are conducting research on people, or **human subjects**.[2]

Unfortunately, scientists don't always engage in ethical research. Most infamously, during World War II, German researchers (mostly doctors) conducted painful and often deadly experiments on people imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps;[3] the prisoners were forced to take part, and the experiments left them with burns, wounds, and other injuries. Aside from the horrific human suffering and death they caused, many of these experiments had little or no scientific value; they didn't help scientists cure diseases or otherwise benefit humanity.

After the war ended, many of these researchers were criminally charged and convicted. The international outrage at what the Nazi experimenters had done led to the establishment of the **Nuremberg Code** in 1948, which outlined basic ethical principles for research on people.[4] The first, and perhaps most important, principle is that people who take part in research must *voluntarily consent* to do so; they cannot be forced. The Code also established other key ethical rules, including the following:

- Researchers should avoid all unnecessary physical and mental suffering and injury to subjects;
- The degree of risk to subjects has to be justified by the likely benefit to humanity of the knowledge gained from the research;

- Subjects must be free to stop participating at any time;
- If researchers discover their project poses serious risks to human subjects, they must end the project immediately.

Despite these clear principles, researchers often ignored the guidelines. One example is the **Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment**, conducted in Alabama from 1932 to 1972.[5] This project looked at how the symptoms of syphilis developed over time if left untreated; the researchers used a poor Black population in rural Alabama as their subjects. Over 40 years, researchers from the U.S. Public Health Service observed hundreds of men who had syphilis. They never told the men that they had syphilis; they simply told them they had "bad blood." Worst of all,

Doctor drawing blood from a patient as part of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. (Source: National Archives, Atlanta, GA.)

after 1947 there was a clear treatment for syphilis: penicillin could completely cure people in the early stages of a syphilis infection. Even after the establishment of the Nuremberg Code in 1948 and its acceptance by the U.S. scientific community, the Tuskegee study researchers didn't tell their subjects about the cure; they let the men's syphilis progress so they could see what happened. As a result, many of the subjects unnecessarily died; others gave the disease to their female partners, who transferred congenital syphilis to their children during pregnancy, leading to lifelong complications including seizures and blindness. The study finally ended in 1972 when a whistleblower revealed that ethical guidelines were clearly being violated, leading to human suffering and death from a treatable disease.

Sadly, there are many other examples of unethical research.[6] As a result of such ethical failures, today federal guidelines protect research subjects.[7] Though most of these guidelines were established primarily to cover medical research, social scientists also have guidelines that guide our research practice.

Social scientists embrace the basic principles from the Nuremberg Code – particularly the idea of **informed consent**. This means that all human subjects must be informed about the research project, including any likely risks, before they agree to participate. For a participant to give *informed* consent, they have to have a full understanding of the risks (and possible benefits) of the research.

Social scientists don't rely just upon their own judgement to protect human subjects. Today, **Institutional Review Boards** (IRBs) exist at every research institution (including colleges and universities) to regulate any research that involves people; we can't begin any project involving people until we have approval from our IRB. IRBs are responsible for carefully evaluating the ethical implications of every research project involving human subjects. The IRB review is an important step in ensuring that our research is ethical and that we take the utmost care to protect the people who volunteer their time to help us pursue scientific knowledge.

Review Sheet: Introduction

Key Points
- Methods allow us to systematically study the world scientifically, giving us more confidence in our findings.
- An audit study showed that having been in prison hurt job applicants' chances of being hired, even when they were otherwise similar to other applicants.
- Skepticism is a key element of the scientific method; scholars constantly search for evidence that claims about the social world are wrong.
- For research to be ethical, those who participate must take part voluntarily, must understand the risks involved, and must be able to stop at any time.
- The Tuskegee Syphilis Study shows how researchers can cause severe harm and even death if they don't follow ethical research principles.

Key People
- Devah Pager

Key Terms
- **Audit study** – Research experiment in which researchers match participants on key characteristics.
- **Method** – A systematic study design.
- **Human subject** – Person who participates in a research study.
- **Nuremberg Code** – First international guidelines establishing research ethics.
- **Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment** – Long-term experiment on Black men in Alabama that demonstrates unethical research design.
- **Informed consent** – Voluntary agreement to participate in research based on a full understanding of the potential risks and benefits.
- **Institutional Review Board** – Group responsible for monitoring research projects at an institution to ensure they are conducted ethically.

TYPES OF RESEARCH METHODS

☐ What are the benefits of experiments, surveys, participant observation, historical analysis, and content analysis?

☐ What are the weaknesses of each of these methods?

☐ How do we choose a particular method?

As you plan your research project, you will decide *how* to collect your data, and what types of data you'll collect. Data generally fall into two categories: quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative** data come in the form of numbers and reflect quantities or amounts. **Qualitative data** aren't numbers; they usually reflect general themes and might include transcripts from interviews or detailed notes from visiting a particular place to observe it.

Five common sociological methods

At the beginning of this chapter, we described Devah Pager's audit study. Audit studies are one type of **experiment**, a research method in which characteristics or behaviors are carefully controlled. By controlling the environment, researchers can isolate the impacts of the one characteristic that changes. Perhaps we want to know whether looking at their friends' social media accounts makes people feel more anxious. We might bring people into a lab and give them a short survey to measure how anxious they are. We could then have them scroll through their friends' social media accounts for 15 minutes and then give them the anxiety survey again. Since nothing else happened during the study, if we find they're more anxious after looking at social media than they were before, we can presume that viewing their friends' posts increased their anxiety.

Experiments can be extremely useful because they allow us to carefully study the impact of one thing at a time. Because we can control what happens to subjects, we can make sure that the only thing that changes is the variable we're interested in. But there are downsides to experiments, too. Especially for those that take place in a laboratory environment, researchers may wonder whether the situation was realistic. Would we see the same effect in the "real world" outside of the carefully-controlled lab? It's possible that a relationship that appears in an experimental setting wouldn't work the same way in our everyday lives, where we're never affected by just one variable at a time. And, as we learned, some of the worst ethical violations we've seen in science have been related to experiments. Because experiments give researchers so much control over subjects, it's especially important to think about ethical issues when designing them.

You may never have taken part in an experiment. But there's a very good chance you've participated in another research method: **surveys**, or sets of questions that subjects answer. They may

be conducted in person or sent through the mail, but increasingly surveys are completed over the phone or online. During the 2018 congressional campaign, you may have received phone calls asking you to rate how concerned you were about different issues. Or maybe you've been asked to complete a satisfaction survey after calling a customer service help line, rating your feelings about the outcome from "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied." Because so many groups use surveys today – including social scientists, marketers, political campaigns, companies, and more – you're likely to encounter them fairly often.

Researchers may visit public places and collect survey responses on the spot. ([Source](#))

Surveys are a very common method because they're a relatively cheap and quick way to get lots of information from large groups of people. That can give us a good idea of widespread patterns, as well as differences between groups (for instance, we might get different survey responses from men and women). But there can be problems with surveys, too. A common issue is low response rates – that is, only a small proportion of people you try to contact complete the survey (perhaps because they're frustrated from receiving so many requests to complete surveys!). Another problem is wording issues.[8] The way you write questions can affect the answers you get. For instance, one group of political scientists found that people responded differently when asked about "gay or lesbian" rights than when asked about "homosexual" rights;[9] because people tend to feel more negatively about the word "homosexual," using it can change how they respond on surveys.
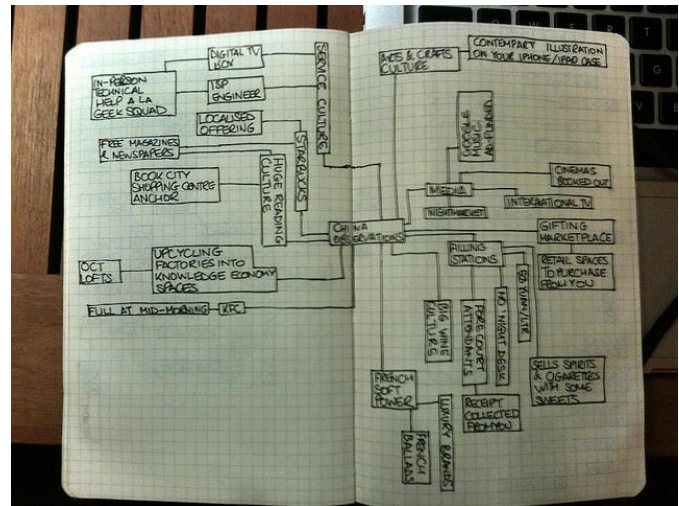
As you read later chapters in this text, you'll encounter several descriptions of **participant observation**.[10] In this method, the researcher spends time among a group, directly observing and participating in the social world they're studying. This can mean moving to another country to live among a different culture, but you can also do participant observation closer to home. For instance, as she describes in the book *Class Acts*, sociologist Rachel Sherman worked at the front desk of two expensive hotels in the U.S. to study how the hotels ensure that their wealthy guests feel pampered.[11] The benefit of participant observation is that it allows researchers to collect a lot of extremely detailed information about social life in a particular group; we can learn what people do, how they interact, and what they think about those interactions. Sherman learned about the tactics hotel employees engaged in to create a "luxury" experience. For instance, room service waiters took notes on how hotel guests like their food served and gift store clerks kept track of any special requests from guests. This

information was entered into a computer database, allowing one guest to receive her papaya cut exactly the way she wanted without having to ask each time and another to have his favorite cigarettes waiting in his room on future visits, though the hotel didn't normally stock that brand. Observing and actively participating in life at the hotel allowed Sherman to understand the intricate ways hotel employees attended to the needs and preferences of their wealthy guests, making them feel valued and effortlessly pampered.

Participant observation involves taking detailed notes about every aspect of the environment. ([Source](#))

However, participant observation can be time-consuming and expensive (especially if you have to move somewhere specifically to do your research). It may take years to earn the trust of a group and feel confident that you truly understand the social world you're studying (especially if there are language barriers). And you'll only gather data on a small number of people; you can't realistically get to know and talk to thousands of people. This can lead to questions about whether your findings apply outside of that small group.[12]

Finally, two related methods are **historical analysis** and **content analysis**.[13] These methods involve analyzing existing sources (such as historical records, media stories, or episodes of TV shows) to find key themes. Sociologists Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner completed a content analysis of *Rolling Stone* cover photos, looking at how men and women were sexually objectified by the magazine.[14] Analyzing nudity, poses, and the focus of the photography, they found that sexualization of both men and women has increased over time, but that women are still sexualized more often, and to a greater degree, than men. In his study of suicide, Émile Durkheim used historical death records from towns across France to see how frequently suicide occurred.[15] Content analysis can help us identify recurring themes that are hard to see when we look at just one instance (for example, we can see patterns in objectification of women by looking at magazine covers over many years that might not be evident if we looked at just one example). A weakness of both methods is that you're stuck with the data that exists, whether or not it includes all the information you'd like. Maybe you want to look at differences by race and ethnicity, but you're using historical documents; if those documents don't indicate the person's race, then you can't study that topic, no matter how interesting it might be.

Choosing a method

So which method is right for your research project? There's no simple answer. Any topic can be studied with any of these methods (and with others; we've only covered the most common here), and every method has strengths and weaknesses.

If you want to understand how thousands of people think about an issue, or what behaviors they engage in (say, whether cigarette taxes have reduced the number of teens who smoke[16]), a survey is likely the best method for your project. On the other hand, maybe you want to study smoking, but you're interested in how teens perceive anti-smoking campaigns and how peer-group dynamics affect decisions to smoke. Then you might conduct a participant observation in a high school;[17] a survey probably won't get you the detailed information you need to fully capture how teens navigate the sometimes conflicting signals from friends, parents, and teachers about smoking. Participant observation might provide richer, more informative data. Another researcher might want to know how smoking is portrayed in movies; a content analysis of how often women are shown smoking in movies, particularly films aimed at young audiences, would provide insights into how smoking is represented in pop culture.[18] Finally, if you want to see whether those representations in pop culture affect attitudes about smoking, you could conduct an experiment where you show a scene with a famous actor smoking and then ask subjects whether they would date someone who smokes.

Each of these studies could provide you with valuable information about smoking. None of them are automatically better than the others. You have to consider what question you want to answer, what research skills you've developed, and what resources you have access to. If you don't have the time or resources to spend months or even years getting to know people and hanging out with them to observe their interactions, the participant observation study won't be realistic for you. If you don't enjoy doing statistical analyses on large datasets, or haven't developed that skill yet, then collecting a large amount of survey data won't help you find meaningful patterns.

Every sociological study you read about in this class was designed based on the skills, resources, and limitations that the researchers faced, as well as what method they thought would best get at their question. Instead of thinking of a study on its own, it's helpful to think of it as one piece in a bigger puzzle, each contributing a small piece to completing the puzzle.

Review Sheet: Types of research methods

Key Points
- Experiments allow us to isolate the effects of one particular characteristic. However, researchers may worry whether effects seen in the controlled world of an experiment apply outside of it in normal conditions.
- Surveys (whether online, by phone, or on paper) are a common and relatively inexpensive method of studying people. They allow us to gather information from

---

many people. However, low response rates and wording issues can affect the accuracy of the findings.
- Participant observation involves spending a lot of time among a social group, directly observing their interactions and behaviors. This provides extremely detailed information about the group, but can be expensive and time-consuming. This method also only allows us to collect data on a small group.
- Historical analysis involves evaluating existing historical sources.
- Content analysis occurs when scholars evaluate existing sources (such as newspaper stories or movies) to look for general patterns or themes. This method can identify larger themes. However, since it involves existing data, researchers are limited to whatever information the sources already contain.
- No one method is "best" for any topic. To choose a method, we have to consider our topic, what question we hope to answer, what resources we have available, and our research skills.

Key People
- Rachel Sherman
- Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner
- Émile Durkheim

Key Terms
- **Quantitative data** – Data in the form of numbers that reflect amounts.
- **Qualitative data** – Non-numerical data.
- **Experiment** – Research method in which the environment is controlled to isolate the effects of one factor or characteristic.
- **Survey** – Gathering data by asking people sets of questions.
- **Participant observation** – Research method in which researcher spends time among a group, observing and participating in their daily lives.
- **Historical analysis** – Analysis of existing historical records.
- **Content analysis** – Analysis of existing sources, focusing on key themes and patterns.

DESIGNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

☐ What kinds of data can we collect to study the social world?

☐ What elements do we include when stating an hypothesis?

☐ What are the benefits of different types of sampling?

From topic to question

Once you've identified a research topic, you're ready to turn that topic into a **research question**. Your research question must really be a question. "I want to show that people from different cultures have different ideas about 'the family'" isn't a question. Who would disagree with you? Most people would probably agree that ideas about family life probably differ across cultures. A research question has to have more than one possible answer or outcome.

There's another problem with this example: "I want to show" is the wrong attitude for research. It sets up the project to find an answer you already have in your mind rather than a true question. Your goal isn't to have a point you want to show; your goal is to have a question you want to answer. And remember, the logic of science is to try to find evidence that your claim is *wrong*, not to show that what you already believed about the world was right.

Variables

Once you have a question, you have to decide what you actually want to observe – your **unit of analysis**. Sometimes we're interested in individual people, but not always. We may ask questions about groups of people, or larger units like organizations, companies, or nations. For example, we might ask how people's incomes are influenced by their education[19] (our unit of analysis for this first question is individual people) or how democratic nations tax their citizens compared to monarchies (our unit of analysis is the nation). There is no "correct" unit of analysis; the appropriate unit depends on what question you want to answer. Once you identify your unit of analysis, you can determine what types of data to collect and which research methods are more or less appropriate for your project.

The thing you will observe is called a **variable**, a factor or characteristic that has more than one possible value. There are many different kinds of variables, which allow for different kinds of analysis. If you take a research methods course, you'll learn about them in detail. For now, we'll cover four common types of variables: nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio.

Nominal data are classified by categories that can't be ranked in any meaningful way. Examples include eye color (e.g., brown, blue, green) or college major (e.g., sociology, physics, education, nursing).[20] While there are different answers for these characteristics, they don't have any obvious distance between them; brown, blue, and green eyes are different, but there isn't any hierarchy among them.

Ordinal data also fall into categories, but a scale provides rankings between the categories. The scale tells us the order of variables.[21] For instance, we might ask someone how satisfied they are with their jobs and ask them to respond from the following options: very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, somewhat unsatisfied, and very unsatisfied. We can rank those answers – we know that being
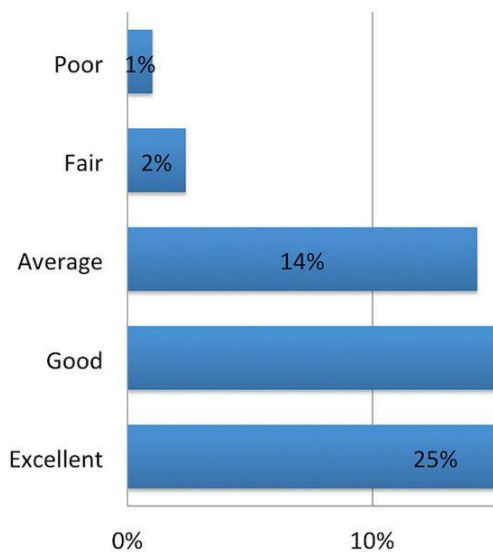
An example of ordinal data. (Source)

"very satisfied" is different than being "somewhat satisfied," and that both are more positive than being "very unsatisfied." But we don't know the precise differences between the answers. That is, while being "very satisfied" with your job is presumably better than being "somewhat satisfied," we don't know exactly *how much more* satisfied a person is if they answer "very" instead of "somewhat." Are they twice as content? Or only a tiny bit more? We can't tell. Being able to rank items can be important, but without knowing the difference between values, we're limited in the kinds of statistical analyses we can do.

With **interval data** and **ratio data**, we know the values of categories and they are placed on a scale, and we also know the precise distance between categories. A good example of interval data is height: we know that someone whose height is 6 feet is taller than someone whose height is 5 feet, 8 inches, and we know exactly how much taller that person is. We also know that the difference between two people who are 5 feet, 8 inches tall and 5 feet, 10 inches tall is exactly the same as the difference between people who are 6 feet, 2 inches tall and 6 feet, 4 inches tall: in both cases, two inches separate them, and inches are always a specific distance. Ratio data are the same as interval data, except that 0 must be a realistic answer that indicates the characteristic doesn't exist. Height isn't a ratio variable; someone can't be 0 inches tall, and it's not possible for a person to have no height. But income and number of children are ratio variables; you can have no income or no children, so 0 is a reasonable answer that indicates that the characteristic doesn't exist.

The types of data we collect determine which analyses we can do. With nominal and ordinal data, we have limited options. We can look at the **frequency** of different items (how often we observed each eye color, for instance), percentages, and the **mode** (the most common response). For example, a researcher might count how often a student asks a teacher for help, or might code transcripts of interviews with immigrant women to understand the specific challenges that women may face when moving to a new country.[22] With interval and ratio data, we can do much more sophisticated statistical analyses. This isn't necessarily better or worse; there are benefits and downsides to any type of analysis, and the "best" analysis depends on what we're interested in studying.

Independent and dependent variables

No matter what kinds of variables we're working with, our goal is to identify **co-variation**, or relationships between variables. Let's say we suggest a relationship between two variables: that a person's education influences their income. In this case, education is the **independent variable** (usually represented as X), meaning it affects the variable you're trying to explain. The other variable – income

– is the **dependent variable** (usually represented as Y), the one you're trying to explain; its value *depends* on the independent variable.

Sometimes when we look for a relationship, we don't observe any co-variation. Perhaps there just isn't any relationship between variables. To take a silly example, we might ask if the length of your thumb influences your income. We could observe the lengths of many people's thumbs (we have variation), and see how this characteristic is related to their income (again we have variation). But it's unlikely that we have any meaningful co-variation; our two variables aren't related to one another. And that's good to know, too! Finding out that characteristics are *not* related can be as important as finding out that they are.

From research question to hypothesis

Now that you have a sense of some of the basic building blocks of research, we're ready to make our question a little more specific by turning it into an **hypothesis**, a statement about how variables relate to one another.

To create an hypothesis, you need to define the population you're interested in studying, under conditions that are of interest, relative to variables you think are important. The general form of an hypothesis looks something like this:

For *Population (P)* in *Condition (C)*, *Independent Variable (X)* is related to *Dependent Variable (Y)*

Are you interested in people from the United States, or just people from Texas? If it's Texans, then there's no point in gathering information about people from California. We rarely want to know about the entire world; we usually just want to know about a very small part of it. So we have to define who we want to know things about: our **population**.

We also have to decide what counts as a condition of interest. Say we're interested in the relationship between education and income in the United States. Do we want to gather information from everyone in the U.S.? Probably not. We probably want to study people who are of working age; if we're studying earnings, why study people who aren't old enough to have a job yet? We also might not want to gather information from people over age 65, since many of these people are retired and don't earn money in the labor market anymore. As we can see from Figure 1, excluding people who are under age 18 or over 65 removes a significant chunk of people from the total population (of course, we could include people age 15 and over, since they may have part-time jobs). Depending on your study, you might also exclude people who are unable to work because of a disability or because they're incarcerated. Carefully defining which conditions we're interested in is an important research decision.

Figure 1: U.S. Age Distribution

U.S. Age Distrbution

23%

16%

62%

■ Under 18   ■ 65+   ■ Working Age
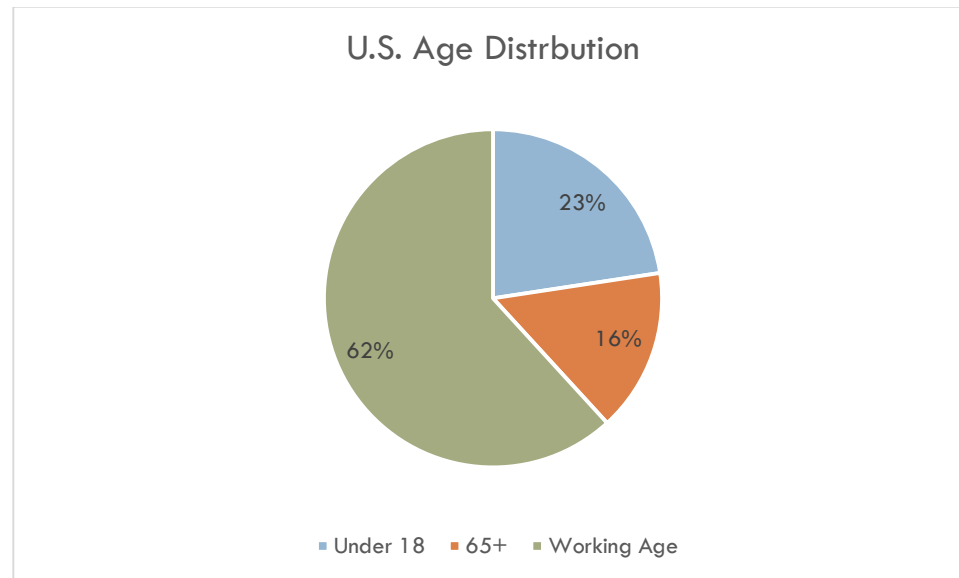
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Data

Now we've got a much more specific hypothesis:

For Americans (P) who are of working age (C), their education (X) explains how much income they make (Y)

These decisions about how to measure our variables are referred to as **operationalization**. This is how we convert an idea into something concrete that we can measure. In this example, operationalizing our variables was fairly simple; our biggest decision was about what age range to include. But other variables can be trickier. Imagine you wanted to study the effect that work stress has on a person's satisfaction with their marriage. How would you operationalize marital satisfaction? Would you ask spouses to fill out a survey about how satisfied they are, from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied"? Would you have them count how often they fight over a two-week period? Whether they have had an affair in the past year? And what about operationalizing work stress so we could measure it? We could do physical tests of the level of stress hormones in their bloodstream. Or ask how often they experience behaviors associated with stress (such as difficulty sleeping). We could also ask them to rate their stress level, from "very high" to "very low."

Whenever you do research, it's likely there are multiple ways you could choose to operationalize your variables. It's essential that you are clear about what your variables are and how you will measure them. Once you've done that, you can get to a fully-detailed hypothesis:

Among people who live in the United States, are of working age, and fill out a survey about their education and salary, those who report having spent more years in school will report having a higher salary than those who report less schooling.

This hypothesis is considerably more limited than where we started. Although social research aims to answer big questions about social life, research projects typically focus on narrow questions. When we're developing a research question, we have to narrow it to a question we can actually answer. But being more specific has its benefits: by asking a question we can actually answer, we'll know more about the world when we complete our research project than when we started.

The key lesson here is that before beginning any research project, you must be able to answer the following questions: what are the relationships I'm interested in studying? How do I decide who counts as part of my population of interest? What concepts do I want to study? And what counts as an observation of these concepts? Whether you do participant observation or an experiment, these are important questions you must be able to answer.

Selecting a sample

A homeless person's belongings in Rijeka, Croatia. (Source)

Once you have an operationalized hypothesis, it's time to figure out who or what you'll observe to test it. It's very rare that we can study everyone we're interested in (our population). Instead, we study a smaller group of people who represent that population. **Sampling** is how social scientists select representatives of their population.[23] Sampling occurs in both quantitative and qualitative work. For example, sociologist Mitch Duneier was interested in homelessness. He couldn't study all homeless people in the country, or even in New York City. Instead, he conducted an **ethnography** – an in-depth qualitative study of a social group and the group's culture – of a neighborhood in lower Manhattan where homeless people (mostly men) sold used books and magazines they retrieved from recycling bins out on the sidewalk.[24] He discussed how the homeless community informally managed their sidewalk markets and how they interacted with the wealthier residents of the area. Duneier wasn't studying all homeless people; he studied a sample of them (a neighborhood), with the hope that what he learned from his sample might reveal themes that applied elsewhere as well.

When sampling, we have to decide how to select a sample that is representative in meaningful ways of the larger population we want to understand. This step involves creating a **sampling frame**. The sampling frame is how you determine who will be contacted to be part of your sample. Examples include randomly selecting from a telephone book, voter list, or a mailing list, or randomly dialing phone numbers.

Every sampling frame comes with challenges. If you use phone listings, you won't be able to access people who have unlisted phone numbers, people who don't have phones, or people who only have cell phones. If you use voter lists, you'll only access people who are registered to vote. With home addresses, you miss people who have moved since your mailing list was created. You will also miss those living in institutions (such as nursing homes or prisons) and people who don't have homes. Selecting a sampling frame means considering issues such as cost, time, what it is you want to know, and from whom. If you would like to know what young people think about an issue, for example, using a telephone directory as your sampling frame may not be wise since many young people only have cell phones that won't be included in phone directories.

When you draw conclusions from your study, strictly speaking, you can't draw conclusions about the population of interest. You can only draw them about the group of people represented by your sampling frame. For example, if we're interested in the attitude of Americans about civic engagement and we decide to use a sampling frame of the telephone directory, we can only make claims such as, "For people listed in the telephone book, their attitudes about civic engagement are…" It's important to pay attention to the limits of findings based upon the sampling frame.

Once we've defined a sampling frame, we draw a sample. This can be done randomly or non-randomly. Many scholars, particularly researchers involved with large surveys, use **random samples**. For a sample to be random, each member of the population must (1) be known and (2) have some chance of being selected. If some elements of the population can't be selected (they have a zero

probability of selection), then the sample isn't random. An example would be if the sample excluded people who were in the sampling frame (say, a mailing list) because they live too far away and it would be too expensive to travel to talk to them. For a random sample, the researcher must know the probability of selection for each unit (whether the unit is a person, neighborhood, or school). The goal of a random sample is to get a sample that is truly representative of the larger population. That allows you to **generalize** your conclusions, or apply them to a larger population outside of the group you studied.

If we draw a **non-random sample**, where some members of the population don't have any chance of being selected, we're quite restricted in the claims we can make. If we're being extremely strict, we can only truly make claims about the actual people we studied, and no one else. That is, we have no generalizability, or ability to apply the findings beyond our sample. However, a lot of social science research uses non-random samples and still makes claims beyond the particular people studied. In these cases, scholars argue that even though their sample is non-random, it still represents general trends. These types of samples are common in qualitative work like interviews and ethnographies, but they also appear in experiments and surveys.

When selecting a sample, a serious concern is **nonresponse bias**. If people don't respond to your attempts to include them in your research, you have to figure out if there is a systematic reason why they aren't participating. Is there anything unusual about the people who aren't responding? In other words, are particular types of people participating at lower rates, and, if so, why? And does that mean you're missing out on an important group, making your sample unrepresentative of the population? Or are the people who *do* respond unusual? Maybe they care a lot more about the topic than most people and that's why they agree to participate when others don't. If there's a systematic reason why some people don't respond and others do, you run the risk of drawing incorrect conclusions based on a sample that is biased in some way.[25]

Say you're asking people their attitudes about sexual behavior. You construct a sample that is representative of the American population. And based on their responses, it looks like people have very permissive attitudes about sexual activity among teenagers. However, you see that a lot of people chose not to respond to your survey. What if those people also happen to have more conservative attitudes about teens having sex? Perhaps people who are likely to be more accepting of teens' sexual activity are also more likely to answer your questions, while people with conservative attitudes decline to answer. Because of the nonresponse bias – the patterns in who didn't respond to your survey– you can't be confident in claiming that your findings represent the larger population.

We end with a final word on sampling, particularly related to qualitative work. As we noted, qualitative work often uses non-random samples. So what can we learn from this work? Keep in mind that different methods have different aims. Quantitative methods seek to establish associations between variables. They answer questions like, "what is the association between education and

income?" Qualitative methods also look at associations, but they often address *how* and *why* questions. What is going on inside schools or with students that their education helps them earn more? Or we might explore how people use their educations to earn more money; how do they get access to the types of volunteer experiences that lead to later job offers? Showing these processes at work often requires digging down to specifics through ethnographic observation or interviews. Because of the ways these methods are conducted, representativeness is much harder to achieve, and sometimes it's impossible.

Qualitative researchers are sensitive to biases that might make their data unique and not generalizable.[26] But the potential weaknesses are often balanced by the benefits: they can provide insights into the rich texture of how social processes work that large-scale representative studies can't. Research doesn't happen in isolation. As researchers develop ideas about how the world works, these ideas can be tested and evaluated in other settings, by other researchers. Qualitative research may be limited in its generalizability, but it can provide ideas that are critically evaluated by quantitative work that is generalizable beyond the sample. In other words, both types of methods have strengths and weaknesses, but they can complement one another.

Review Sheet: Designing a research project

Key Points
- Your variables are the factors you're trying to explain. Your independent variable (X) is the characteristic you believe causes something; your dependent variable (Y) is caused by, or depends on, the independent variable.
- Nominal data have categories that can't be ranked in any clear way, such as ethnicity. Individuals have different ethnicities, but we can't mathematically rank them.
- Ordinal data can be ranked; scales from "very much" to "not at all" or "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied" are ordinal. However, you don't know exactly how much distance is between each category.
- Interval data can be ranked and we know the exact distance between answers. Height is an example. Ratio data are similar, except that 0 has to be a realistic answer; an example is income.
- When analyzing data, we're looking for co-variation between variables. Our hypothesis is a statement of what we think the relationship between the variables will look like. An hypothesis includes a statement about the population, condition, independent variable, and dependent variable.
- Operationalization is a key element of research design. How you operationalize your variables will depend on what you're trying to study.
- Random samples allow us to study a small group and have it represent the larger population. Non-random samples may not allow us to generalize outside the study.
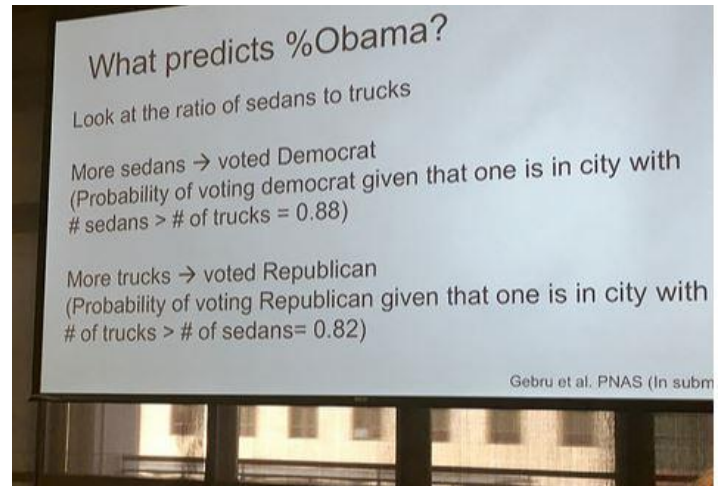
Key People

- Mitch Duneier

- **Research question** –A question about a research topic that we can reasonably answer.
- **Unit of analysis** – Item observed in a study (ex: individual people, cities, neighborhoods, apartment complexes, nations).
- **Variable** – Any characteristic that has more than one possible value.
- **Nominal data** – Values can't be ranked.
- **Ordinal data** – Values can be ranked, but distance between categories is unknown.
- **Interval data** – Values can be ranked and exact distance between categories is known.
- **Ratio data** – Values can be ranked, exact distance between categories is known, and 0 is a realistic possible answer.
- **Frequency** – How often a particular value is observed.
- **Mode** – Single most common value or response.
- **Co-variation** – Relationship between variables.
- **Independent variable** – Variable that causes a change in another.
- **Dependent variable** – Variable that changes in response to another.
- **Hypothesis** – Statement about how variables are expected to relate to each other.
- **Population** – The entire group of interest in a study.
- **Operationalization** – Defining variables into measurable items.
- **Sampling** – Selecting representatives of the population to study.
- **Ethnography** – In-depth study of a group and its culture.
- **Sampling frame** – Method for choosing which members of a population will be in a sample.
- **Random sample** – A representative sample in which every member of the population has some chance of being selected.
- **Generalize** – Apply findings beyond the sample to the larger population.
- **Non-random sample** – A sample in which not every member of the population has a chance of being selected.
- **Nonresponse bias** – Non-representativeness in a sample caused by patterns in who does and doesn't respond.

CORRELATION AND CAUSATION

☐   How is correlation different from causation?

☐   How can we demonstrate causation?

☐   Why are spurious variables a challenge for social science research?

After we've designed our study, chosen our sample, and collected data, we can analyze what we've found. Imagine we collect data and find a relationship between how much time fathers spend with their children and how healthy their children are; the more time fathers spend with their kids, the healthier the children are, on average. What can we say about that relationship? Did our independent variable (X – time fathers spend with their kids) cause our dependent variable (Y – kids' health) to change? In all likelihood, no. We've demonstrated a **correlation** between the variables – that they are related in some way. But that doesn't necessarily mean we've

This research presentation suggests a correlation between types of vehicles (sedans vs. trucks) and voting patterns. ([Source](#))

found **causation**, or evidence that the independent variable *caused* the change in the dependent variable.[27] There are a few reasons why.

First, we may not have identified the correct **direction of the relationship** (which variable affects the other). We may think that X causes Y, but maybe it's the reverse: Y could be causing X. In our example, we might think that children are healthier *because* their fathers spend time with them. This explanation seems to makes sense; it feels right. But we could have the direction of the relationship completely wrong. Perhaps the health of children affects how much time fathers spend with them; maybe it's stressful to spend time with unhealthy children, so fathers don't engage with them as much as with healthy children. Or maybe unhealthy children have high medical expenses, so their fathers work more to pay for the treatments, leaving them with less time to spend with their kid.

Establishing that we've found a **causal relationship** (one where causation exists) requires considerably more work than demonstrating a correlation. One way we can prove causality is through research design – for example, by using experiments.[28] As we explained in the discussion of types of research, experiments carefully control the environment to isolate the effects of the independent

variable. If we then see a change in our dependent variable, we can be more confident that it was caused by the independent variable, since that's the only thing that changed during the experiment.

We can also identify the direction of a relationship if one variable clearly happens first, or precedes the other one; the variable that changes later can't possibly affect the variable that changed first. To test our example, we might look for cases where children get sick and see what happens. Do fathers decrease their parenting time after their child gets sick? Or we could look in the other direction: If fathers begin to spend less time with their children, does their kids' health suffer? If we can figure out which variable comes first, we have a solid case for arguing that we know the direction of the relationship.

But even if we figure out the direction of the relationship, it's possible there isn't a true causal relationship between our variables. A **spurious relationship** exists when it looks like there's a connection between two variables, but in reality some other variable we haven't taken into account is affecting both our independent and dependent variables.

Let's look at the impact of education on income. Researchers observe a strong relationship between these two variables; people with more education make more money. Education *precedes* (it comes before) income, so we can be fairly certain of the direction: education causes higher earnings. So we have a situation that looks something like this:

Higher education $\longrightarrow$ Higher earnings

However, we still have to worry about whether we've found a spurious relationship. What if some other variable affects both level of education and earnings? Our worry can be presented in the following diagram:

Higher education   Higher earnings
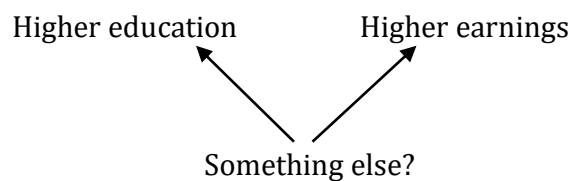
Something else?

Perhaps the "something else" we didn't take into account is parents' income. Maybe children of wealthier parents are likely to complete more schooling. And children of wealthier parents are also more likely to earn higher incomes. Parents' income might explain both their kids' education *and* earnings. In that case, the correlation between these two variables exists – they *are* related – but education wouldn't *explain* or *cause* earnings as we initially thought. The relationship between education and earnings would be a spurious relationship, since family background (in this case, how much parents earned) affects how much education their children get *and* their children's future earnings (perhaps because wealthier parents are able to connect their children to hard-to-get internships that lead to future jobs, for instance).

Spuriousness is a challenge for most social science methods except experiments. Experiments isolate the effects of a single variable, so there are fewer worries about spurious results. But for all other methods, an unobserved spurious variable is always a concern. As we design research projects, scholars try to gather information on the most likely spurious variables so we can rule them out as possible explanations.

Validity and reliability

A key question for all research projects is whether we are measuring what we think we are measuring – that is, do our findings have **validity**?[29] This is an important consideration. Random sampling and complex statistical analysis are pointless if it turns out that you weren't actually measuring what you meant to be. Say we studied attitudes toward different racial groups. We ask people, "Do you have racist attitudes toward other groups?" The problem we run into here is **social desirability bias** – the tendency for subjects to give answers that they think are socially acceptable.[30] In the U.S., most people are aware that it's generally unacceptable to be racist. This means that even if people hold extremely negative views of certain racial or ethnic groups, they are very reluctant to identify as racist.[31] So our question probably won't be a valid measure of racial attitudes. A better approach would be to avoid the loaded term "racist" and instead ask a series of questions about specific interactions or beliefs (such as how comfortable they would be with members of other races as neighbors, coworkers, or as in-laws).

We can encounter validity problems even when social desirability bias isn't a factor. Sometimes questions simply don't get at what we meant to measure. Maybe we're studying how satisfied spouses are with their married life, and we ask participants, "How likely are you to get divorced?" as a measure of their satisfaction. But probably only the most dissatisfied people would say they are likely to get divorced, so you may miss a lot of dissatisfaction that exists but isn't severe enough to cause people to consider divorce. Or people might be extremely unhappy with their marriages, but unlikely to get divorced; perhaps they have children that affect their decision, are members of a religious group that discourages divorce, or simply can't afford to set up their own independent household. There are lots of reasons that someone's prediction of whether they will get divorced might not be a good indicator of how satisfied they are with their marriage. Whenever social scientists design studies, we have to carefully consider what questions to ask to get at the characteristic we're hoping to learn about.

In addition to asking how valid our research is, we must ask about the **reliability** of our observations, or the consistency of the measurements. If several members of a research team interview people about why they volunteer to coach a children's soccer team, can we be sure that each researcher asks the questions in the same way? If the question is, "why is volunteering to coach important to you?" but one researcher uses a tone that suggests that volunteering is a waste of time while another uses a tone that suggests it's incredibly important, then subjects aren't really answering the same question, even though the words are the same. In the first instance, people may feel the need

to justify themselves, whereas in the second, they may want to confirm just how great volunteering to coach is. The result is low reliability; our measurement of responses to "why is volunteering to coach children's soccer important to you?" won't be consistent.

Challenges to reliability can also come from problems with the instrument used to collect the data, such as when survey questions are too vague and open to interpretation. For example, if we surveyed a group of students and asked them, "Is class important to your life?" some may answer about their social class (economic background), while others might reply about their experiences in the classroom. When designing research projects, we have to be careful that we ask questions in consistent ways and that research participants themselves interpret the questions similarly.

CONCLUSION

We have introduced you to some of the key elements of research design and interpretation. The main points we hope you take away from this chapter are that studying social life is messy and difficult, but that careful research design can help us investigate it scientifically, giving us confidence in our findings. Nonetheless, whenever you encounter research claims, it's always good to maintain some skepticism, especially when the findings reflect what you already want to believe. Social science is an ongoing project, where studies build on those that have already been completed. Later studies, with different research designs, may alter what we think we know – or may confirm previous findings. As we slowly add to sociological research on a topic, we collectively come to a better understanding of the complex and fascinating social world around us.

Review Sheet: Correlation and causation

Key Points
- Correlation indicates that variables are related in some way. It is easier to establish than causation, in which we can claim that one variable leads to a change in another.
- One way to establish causation is to see which variable precedes the other.
- A spurious relationship exists when some outside variable we haven't thought of explains the relationship between our variables. Research design should collect data on the most likely spurious variables in order to analyze their possible effects.
- Validity relates to whether we have measured what we intended to measure. Social desirability bias is a challenge to valid measures.
- Reliability refers to whether our measurements are consistent, so that different subjects interpret the question in the same way.

Key Terms
- **Correlation** – A relationship between variables.
- **Causation** – One variable causes a change in another variable.

- **Direction of relationship** – Which variable is affecting the other when a relationship exists.
- **Causal relationship** – Relationship that includes causation between variables.
- **Spurious relationship** – When a third variable actually explains the apparent connection between two variables.
- **Validity** – Whether questions accurately measure the intended characteristic.
- **Social desirability bias** – Problems introduced to data when respondents give answers they believe are socially acceptable.
- **Reliability** – Consistency of measurements.

REFERENCES

[1] Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology* 108(5): 937-975.

[2] National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. 1978. *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*. Bethesda, MD.

[3] Mellanby, Kenneth. 1947. "Medical Experiments on Human Beings in Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany." *British Medical Journal* 1: 148-150.

[4] Weindling, Paul. "The Origins of Informed Consent: The International Scientific Commission on Medical War Crimes, and the Nuremberg Code." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75(1): 37-71.

[5] Brandt, Allan M. 1978. "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *The Hastings Center Report* 8(6): 21-29.

[6] Babbie, Earl. 2004. "Laud Hymphreys and Research Ethics." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 24(3): 12-19.

[7] Protection of Human Subjects. 45 CFR part 46. 2017. Retrieved from https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=83cd09e1c0f5c6937cd9d7513160fc3f&pitd=20180719&n=pt45.1.46&r=PART&ty=HTML#se45.1.46_1101

[8] Schuman, Howard and Stanley Presser. 1996. *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Context*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[9] Smith, Brianna A., Zein Murib, Matthew Motta, Timothy H. Callaghan, and Marissa Theys. 2017. "'Gay' or 'Homosexual'? The Implications of Social Category Labels for the Structure of Mass Attitudes." *American Politics Research* 46(2): 336-372.

[10] Jorgensen, Danny L. 2015. "Participant observation." *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*. 1-15. Retrieved at https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0247

[11] Sherman, Rachel. 2007. *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[12] Becker, Howard S. 1958. "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation." *American Sociological Review* 23(6): 652-660.

[13] Neuendorf, Kimberly A. 2017. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2nd edition. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

[14] Hatton, Erin and Mary Nell Trautner. 2011. "Equal Opportunity Objectification? The Sexualization of Men and Women on the Cover of *Rolling Stone*." *Society & Culture* 15: 256-278.

[15] Durkheim, Émile. 1951[1897]. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London: Routledge.

[16] Carpenter, Christopher and Philip J. Cook. 2008. "Cigarette Taxes and Youth Smoking: New Evidence from National, State, and Local Youth Risk Behavior Surveys." *Journal of Health Economics* 27(2): 287-299.

[17] Eckert, Penelope. 1983. "Beyond the Statistics of Adolescent Smoking." *American Journal of Public Health* 73(4): 439-441.

[18] Escamilla, Gina, Angie L. Cradock, and Ichiro Kawachi. 2000. "Women and Smoking in Hollywood Movies: A Content Analysis." *American Journal of Public Health* 90(3): 412-414.

[19] Day, Jennifer Cheeseman and Eric C. Newburger. 2002. The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.

[20] Porter, Stephen R. and Paul D. Umbach. 2006. "College Major Choice: An Analysis of Person-Environment Fit." *Research in Higher Education* 47(4): 429-449.

[21] Allen, I. Elaine and Christopher A. Seaman. "Likert Scales and Data Analyses." *Quality Progress* 40(7): 64-65.

[22] Huisman, Kimberly. 2010. "Developing a Sociological Imagination by Doing Sociology: A Methods-Based Service-Learning Course on Women and Immigration." *Teaching Sociology* 38(2): 106-118.

[23] Cochran, William G. 2007. *Sampling Techniques*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

[24] Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

[25] Groves, Robert M. and Emilia Peytcheva. 2008. "The Impact of Nonresponse Rates on Nonresponse Bias: A Meta-Analysis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72(2): 167-189.

[26] Gobo, Giampeitro. 2004. "Sampling, Representativeness, and Generalizability." Pp. 435-456 in Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

[27] Goldthorpe, John H. 2001. "Causation, Statistics, and Sociology." *European Sociological Review* 17(1): 1-20.

[28] Shadish, William R., Thomas D. Cook, and Donald Thomas Campbell. 2002. *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

[29] Drost, Ellen A. 2011. "Validity and Reliability in Social Science Research." *Educational Research and Perspectives* 38(1): 105-123.

[30] Krumpal, Ivar. 2011. "Determinants of Social Desirability Bias in Sensitive Surveys: A Literature Review." *Quality & Quantity* 47(4): 2025-2047.

[31] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cover Photo Source

A Sociology Experiment

Shamus Khan, Columbia University
Patrick Sharkey, Princeton University
Gwen Sharp, Nevada State College

A Sociology Experiment

SHAMUS KHAN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
PATRICK SHARKEY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
GWEN SHARP, NEVADA STATE COLLEGE

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology

A new science for a changing world

FOUNDERS OF SOCIOLOGY

Karl Marx

Émile Durkheim

Max Weber

AN AMERICAN TRADITION: EXPANDING SOCIOLOGY

Jane Addams

W.E.B. DuBois

The ideas of tomorrow: a social science at the intersections

A SOCIOLOGY EXPERIMENT

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

☐ How is our behavior affected by being in a group?

☐ What does it mean to think sociologically?

☐ How did the Industrial Revolution and growth of cities influence the development of sociology?

Have you ever watched a newscast of a protest that turns violent? How about a video of college students screaming wildly and burning old furniture, or adults throwing punches in the bleachers during a brawl at a football game? Have you ever looked at the raging college kids or the drunken sports fans, shaken your head, and wondered: "What's wrong with these people?" Have you thought to yourself, "There's no way I would ever behave like that"?

Maybe you're right. Maybe not.

Sociologist **Mark Granovetter** has studied a wide variety of topics in his career, like how organizations work and the way people draw on "friends of friends" to find jobs.[1] He has also produced important insights into the way that our individual behavior can be influenced by the actions of those around us—like, for instance, in the middle of a brawl, a wild campus party, or a riot.[2]

Granovetter began by imagining a scene where a group of people are together in the same place for a political protest. Most people in the crowd are there to join with others to express their opinions; they have no intention of throwing a rock through a store window, starting a fight, or burning a police car. But a couple of those in the crowd are willing to cause mayhem at the slightest provocation; maybe they didn't show up specifically hoping for a riot, but they'll jump in pretty gleefully if an opportunity presents itself. When a police officer shows

A peaceful protest at Los Angeles City Hall. (Source)

up and barks out an order to disperse, those few people suddenly begin to shout more loudly, and one of them picks up a rock and throws it.

Most people in the crowd are shocked by the troublemakers and don't join them. But as the police officers press forward, a couple more people in the crowd, with a surge of adrenaline, are inspired by the act of rebellion, pick up a rock or bottle, and throw it at the police. In response, the police shout orders more forcefully and start to push a few protesters backward. Now a larger group of people in the crowd begin to get agitated, yelling at the police to stop pushing. They had no intention of joining a riot when they left home, but they see what is happening around them and decide to join in. They push back against the advancing officers. With the police advancing with their batons out, the group of peaceful protesters has become a chaotic, angry mass of people outraged by the actions of the police and inspired by those around them to fight back.

Explaining all of the individual decisions that result in the outbreak of a riot is extremely difficult. Economists assume that individuals calculate the costs and benefits of a potential action and then decide how to act. But if everyone was thinking through the costs and benefits of their actions, a riot usually *wouldn't* break out; a few of the most aggressive protesters with nothing to lose might decide to throw rocks, but the rational people in the crowd would walk away. Psychologists try to understand why some individuals tend to be more prone to violence and impulsive behavior than others. But in Granovetter's scenario, most people who showed up at the protest were not particularly violent people. We would think that the small number of highly-aggressive people in the crowd would be arrested or shunned, and that would be the end of it.

To understand how a riot breaks out, we need to think about individual behavior differently. Staring at a television or computer screen in the comfort of our living room or dorm room, it's easy to imagine how calmly we would behave in the middle of a frantic riot. But Granovetter's crucial insight was that our actions don't take place in a social vacuum, where we can rationally and individually think through the consequences. They take place within a social context in which our own behavior is influenced by the setting and by the behavior of everyone around us.

In a crowd of protesters, there may be only a few who are willing to turn to violence first. But there are a few more who may be willing to resort to violence if they see others taking a lead. And there is a larger group that will consider joining in if a significant number of protesters become more aggressive. And even more don't want to take part in violence, and will do so only if they see most of their fellow protesters involved. A few more will only take part in the violence if everyone else is already doing so. Even if almost all of the protestors would prefer to avoid taking part in violence, once they are together their behavior changes.

They respond to the action around them, and the violence of the moment spreads through the crowd like an infectious disease.

A riot, like many forms of group behavior, can't be explained by studying individuals as if they move through the world completely isolated from each other. A riot is the product of a collective process where individuals come together and experience a common set of emotions, react to the actions of others, pick up

cues from the setting, and take a course of action. A riot is about the way we interact with each other within a specific context. It is, at a fundamental level, a social event.

Sociology

Sociology covers all aspects of social life, including many topics you might read about in psychology, economics, or political science. It is not focused on what goes on physiologically inside the mind and body. It does not assume that each decision and action is the result of rational calculations driven by financial incentives and costs. It is not limited to the study of politics and power. Like psychologists, sociologists study the brain, but they consider how the brain responds to threats and resources in our social environments. Like economists, sociologists study economic markets, but they focus on how our social networks, or connections to other people, influence the way we navigate those markets, and how those markets are altered by social forces, by culture, and by inequality. Like political scientists, sociologists study political power and elections, but they focus on how public opinion is influenced by social forces. Sociology considers how the brain responds to our environment, how our decisions are influenced by our economic circumstances (especially compared to the economic circumstances of our neighbors and friends), and how political structures shape our educational opportunities and life chances.

Sociology—the study of how societies are organized and how the organization of a society influences the behavior of people living in it—encourages you to approach these topics with a new perspective, guided by what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination."[3] The **sociological imagination** is the capacity to think about our own personal experience in relation to a larger set of social forces that influence every aspect of our lives, whether they are visible to us or not.

For instance, how did you get your first name? Most likely, your parents chose it for you, perhaps after much agonizing and discussion of just the right name. Perhaps you're named after a beloved grandparent. Maybe it's a name someone thought would bring you good luck. You may have chosen an entirely new name for yourself and had it legally changed. In some sense, choosing a name is a very private, individual-level decision, tied to parents' personal tastes and their hopes for their child.

But your name is also tied to the larger culture and influenced by social pressures outside your family. While your parents most likely picked your name, they probably weren't completely free to name you anything they wanted. Take the case of parents in Tennessee who wanted to name their child Messiah. A judge changed the boy's name to Martin, arguing that the name Messiah was not in the child's best interest.[4] (The parents appealed the decision to a higher court, where it was overturned.) Some countries ban certain names. Sweden doesn't allow names that are considered offensive, that might cause the child to be ridiculed, or that "for some obvious reason are not suitable as a first name." That last condition led to a court case in 2009, when parents wanted to name their baby Q (the courts said no).[5]

The social pressures parents face when choosing a name don't come just in the form of laws. Even if a name is legal, there may be consequences for choosing it. In 2008, employees at a New Jersey grocery store refused to fill an order for a child's birthday cake. Why? The parents had ordered a cake decorated with their son's name: Adolf Hitler Campbell. The publicity around this incident led the Department of Youth and Family Services to investigate the child's parents.[6] As the child grows up, his name is likely to cause others to make many assumptions about him—assumptions that might impact his ability to get a job, or a date, or to make friends.

While anyone who names their child Adolf Hitler today probably knows there will be negative reactions, most parents worry about unanticipated problems related to a name. Parents may worry about social reactions: Will a name cause other kids to tease their child or give them an embarrassing nickname? Does it seem old-fashioned or boring? Will it seem unprofessional later in life? Will people discriminate against their child on job applications if they choose an identifiably "ethnic" name?

So even though choosing a child's name is a very personal decision made by individual families, it is also a social decision, and one that can have far-reaching consequences for a child's life. This is what C. Wright Mills meant by the sociological imagination: the ability to evaluate some part of your life and recognize how social forces played a role in how it came to be the way it is.

A new science for a changing world

Where did the sociological imagination come from? Like a lot of academic fields, sociology emerged in the mid-1800s. There's a reason ideas began to coalesce at that moment: there were suddenly a lot more people in the world, and all these new people meant that societies were changing rapidly.[7] If we look at world population since the beginning of human history, we see something truly startling. It took almost all of human history—tens of thousands of years—for the world population to reach one billion people.[8] We now add an additional billion people to the planet in under 20 years.[9] More people doesn't necessarily mean more problems, but it has led to dramatic changes in the way that humans live together and the way that society is organized.

Much of this shift was driven by the **Industrial Revolution**, which began in Europe in the 1700s and spread to the U.S. in the 1800s. This revolution—the rapid development of manufacturing and industry inspired by technological changes in machinery—upended national economies. Instead of working in agriculture, more and more people worked in factories. As people moved out of rural villages with hopes of finding manufacturing jobs, cities grew rapidly. It wasn't just the economy that changed. So did our politics, the places we lived, how we survived, how much we relied upon others, how we related to others, what we did with our time, and what we believed about the world around us. This is what we mean by a "revolution." The ways in which humans organized almost every aspect of their lives were transformed.

Much of early sociology was interested in how communities rapidly changed from contexts where people had to do most things for themselves—grow their food, make their clothes, build their own shelters—

to communities where people relied on others to do almost everything for them. If tomorrow there were no more grocery stores, restaurants, or cafeterias, how would you eat? If suddenly you couldn't buy clothes at a store, what would you do? For most of human history, these questions wouldn't be a problem, they'd be a daily reality. Even today, billions of people around the world live in rural areas where they are far more self-reliant than people in urban areas. But with the Industrial Revolution, this was no longer realistic. If workers spent all day at a factory, where would they find the time to grow their own food or weave their own fabric for clothing? City dwellers became increasingly dependent on each other as they specialized in various tasks.[10] A factory worker's wages could buy bread from the baker, who in turn used some of that income to buy furniture from a carpenter, and so on. Writing in 1776, Adam Smith argued that this **division of labor** was the most important factor in the wealth of nations.[11] If you divided jobs up, different individuals could specialize in what they were best at and trade the surplus. They'd be dependent on each other, but their community would have more products to trade as a result of that social dependency.
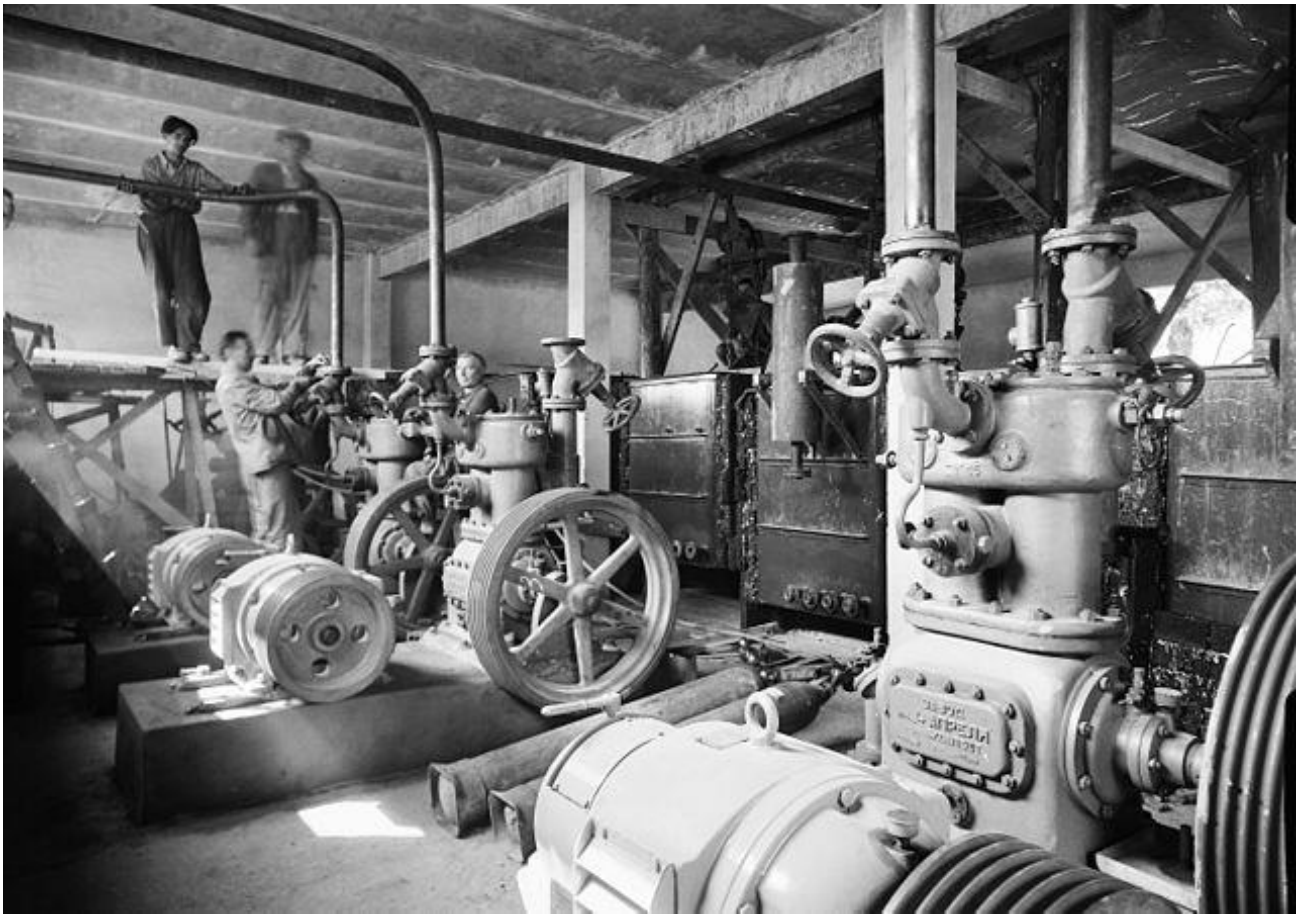
Factories and the use of steam-powered engines transformed the economy and, ultimately, virtually every aspect of our lives. ([Source](#))

In addition to growing interdependence, the population boom and movement to cities caused other changes that influenced early sociologists. City life in the 1800s was pretty terrible. With large numbers of people moving into fast-growing cities, buildings were overcrowded and neighborhoods lacked basic

sanitation. Waste from humans and livestock (including the thousands of horses used as transportation) covered the streets. There were no workplace safety or minimum wage laws, so people—including children—often worked long hours in unsafe conditions for extremely low wages. With so many poor workers crowded together in unsanitary housing, and streets that lacked sewage systems, disease spread easily and fires wiped out entire neighborhoods. Overall, city life was unpleasant and dangerous for many of its residents.

This rapidly changing world, with all its growing pains and struggles, was what the founders of sociology were trying to understand and to explain. In this chapter we introduce you to sociology by covering some classic ideas, many written right around the time that the human population was growing rapidly, the economy was transforming, and life in industrialized cities was just beginning. While some of these ideas emerged nearly 200 years ago, they still influence how we think today. And as our society changes so rapidly around us—with new technologies fundamentally transforming how we interact with and relate to each other, work, spend our free time, and even participate in politics—we can look back to these classic ideas to learn from others who lived through a similarly revolutionary moment of their own.

Review Sheet: What is sociology?

Key Points
- Group behavior is more than the individual decisions of each separate person. Group dynamics and the setting change the decision-making process for the individuals involved.
- Mark Granovetter argued that events like riots can be seen as an infectious disease that breaks out among a small group but spreads through more and more people in the crowd.
- Sociology overlaps with other disciplines, such as political science, psychology, and economics. It takes a broad view, looking at how individuals and the social environment influence each other.
- The economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution affected virtually every aspect of our lives, leading to rapid social changes.
- As people moved to cities they became more dependent on one another, since workers specialized in different tasks and could no longer produce all the items they needed to survive.

Key People
- Mark Granovetter
- C. Wright Mills

Key Terms
- **Sociology** – The study of how societies are organized and how the organization of a society influences the behavior of people living in it.

- **Sociological imagination** – A perspective in which we think about our own personal experience in relation to a larger set of social forces that influence every aspect of our lives.
- **Industrial Revolution** – The rapid development in the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s of manufacturing and industry, enabled by technological changes in machinery and power sources.
- **Division of labor** – An economic arrangement in which workers, and even entire communities, specialize in particular tasks or products, rather than producing everything they need themselves.

FOUNDERS OF SOCIOLOGY

☐ How did early thinkers view the role of conflict and cohesion in societies?

☐ What did each scholar see as the driving force in society?

Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818-1883) began writing before the term "sociologist" existed. Marx's work spanned a wide range of areas—history, economics, politics, philosophy, and psychology. Remembered today as one of the founders of socialism or communism, Marx actually spent most of his time writing about capitalism and the massively changing economic relations it brought about. He witnessed the Industrial Revolution and its world-altering consequences, particularly the rapid growth of cities as people moved to work in the new factories. Looking at this situation, Marx struggled to understand how society was being radically re-organized. He studied the wide range of ways in which human societies had been organized throughout history and how they changed. He concluded that all societies are based on **social conflict**, a struggle between groups who have differing interests and needs.[12] The basis of this conflict was the ownership and distribution of goods and resources—or more simply, economic relationships. Marx argued that if you wanted to understand a society—any society—you needed to look at how things were made. Changes to societies came about because of social conflicts over how things are made and distributed.
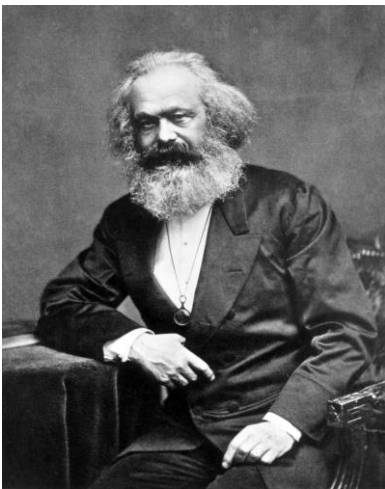
Karl Marx. (Source)

In an industrial capitalist system, Marx argued that the central conflict is between two key groups, or **classes**: owners (or capitalists) and workers.[13] Capitalists own

important resources like factories and determine how workers do their jobs. Workers only truly own their **labor**, or capacity to work; they sell this to capitalists for **wages**. The main desire of capitalists is to accumulate more and more wealth for themselves; the way to do this is to organize work in such a way that workers receive lower and lower wages for their labor. Part of their strategy is to put workers in competition with one another, so workers view each other as enemies rather than organizing together to fight the capitalists. Workers, on the other hand, want higher wages and more control over the labor process—to be able to decide how they work. So capitalists want to pay workers less and less for their work, while workers want to be paid more for what they do. From Marx's perspective, this class conflict defines capitalist society.[14] Such class conflict is so consuming, and so important, that Marx imagined that all other aspects of our lives—politics, culture, the family—were defined by the economic system and the tensions within it.

The Haymarket Riots, as represented by the magazine Harpers Weekly *in 1886. What began as a peaceful event by labor activists protesting capitalists and advocating for an 8-hour workday turned into a violent conflict between workers and police. (Source)*

Marx was a **relational sociologist**. Instead of focusing on the properties and characteristics of individuals, he argued that individuals are defined by their relationships with others and with social institutions such as the economy.[15] Being a capitalist isn't a personality type; it's a relationship that an individual is in with others—particularly workers. This isn't to say that Marx ignored psychology. In fact, a central aspect of his theory involves the concept of **alienation,** the feeling of being disconnected from others,

from work, and even from our own sense of humanity. Marx suggested that one of the core problems with capitalism is that workers are alienated. Since they often have to compete with one another for jobs, they are alienated from each another. And because the capitalist tells workers *how* to make things (for instance, how fast they have to work), they are alienated by the labor process itself. Finally, they have little control over *what* they make, so workers are also alienated from the things they produce. Taken together, Marx argued that workers are alienated from their very humanity, since they are in tension with other workers and have little control over their work lives.

The very name Karl Marx has come to mean very different things to different people, and is now associated with radical politics and systems of government like socialism and communism. But we encourage you to step back from the baggage associated with Karl Marx and think about when and how his ideas might be useful to make sense of your own experiences. Does it make sense to think **relationally,** to ask how your relationships form you? Does it make sense that how you work, and how much control you have over what you do, is incredibly important for understanding your life? How useful is the idea of alienation in modern society? Do you ever feel disconnected from others, from the activities that take up your time, or even from your own sense of humanity? The importance of studying the ideas of someone like Marx, or any of the thinkers we discuss, is less about knowing what he said, and more about imagining ways in which those ideas, and the scholar's method of studying issues, might be useful for understanding the social world.

Émile Durkheim

French sociologist **Émile Durkheim** (1858-1917; pronounced DUR-kime) played a key role in the development of sociology into a social *science*.[16] He insisted that the study of society should follow rigorous rules and, like other sciences, should rely on data to test whether our ideas about the world are correct. Durkheim sought to make sociology different from fields like philosophy. It isn't enough to think about the world and what others had written about it; we have to gather evidence to see if we are right, and we should use agreed-upon methods to gather that evidence in as scientific a way as possible.

Like Marx, Durkheim was deeply interested in the emergence of capitalism and its effects on society. But instead of focusing on class conflict, he emphasized structural properties that help explain social life. Durkheim's structural approach is not opposed to Marx's relational approach—as you'll soon learn, they're actually related to one another—but the emphasis is slightly different. By **structure** we mean forces that both impact individual behavior and are produced by that behavior. This is one of the most
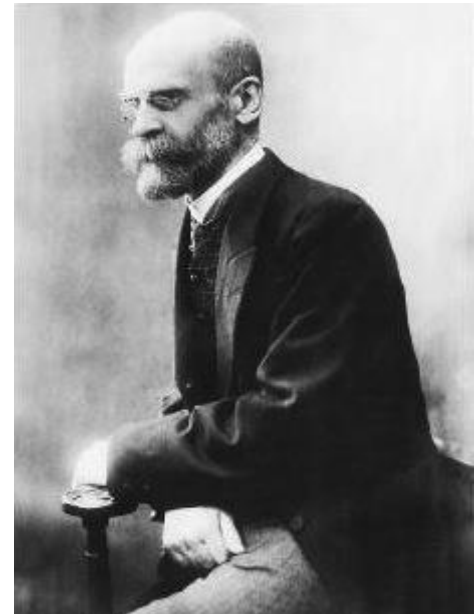
Émile Durkheim. ([Source](#))

important, yet most difficult, concepts in sociology. To better understand it, let's look more closely at Durkheim's work.

In *The Division of Labor in Society,* Durkheim explores how the structure of societies has changed over time.[17] Whereas Marx thought of the division of labor as the way in which economic production was divided into more and more specialized tasks, Durkheim was more interested in society as a whole. He argued that it was important to see how people in a society were connected. He called the patterns of these connections **solidarity**. Older and simpler societies, Durkheim argued, are defined by **mechanical solidarity.** All the parts are intricately connected, the society is extremely cohesive, and people are highly integrated with one another. Think of a watch or machine made of parts that all rely on one another and are integrated together for a single purpose. Or think of a family, where every member of the family knows every other member; the family is a cohesive, integrated unit, and family members generally have clear roles and expectations for each other.

As societies become more complex—as there is an increase in the division of labor—they are increasingly defined by **organic solidarity**, where some members are only very distantly connected to one another, but members increasingly rely on each other. The U.S. is characterized by organic solidarity. Many Americans have almost no connection to the people who grow the food we eat or make the clothes we wear. And yet we depend on that food and those clothes to survive.

Durkheim's fascinating insight is that mechanical societies often make people feel far more integrated and even essential. Mechanical solidarity can give us a sense of purpose and place, since we feel essential to other people and even to our entire community (though such small worlds can also make us feel trapped!). But mechanical societies can be quite fragile. Remove one part, and the mechanical society might not work anymore (think about what it would mean to remove one part of a watch, or the impact on a family if one member suddenly disappeared). Organic societies are far more resilient. They are less reliant upon individual members. If one small part of the society, or one individual, is removed, the society is still very likely to survive. But for the individuals within these societies, there can be a sense of uselessness; you're not as necessary or important to the larger community. The conundrum here is the different consequences for societies and for the people who live in them: What makes individuals feel essential makes societies fragile, and what makes societies robust makes individuals feel alone. For Durkheim, how we're tied to one another—the structure of solidarity—creates very different experiences for people.

This led Durkheim to think about two important dimensions of society: integration and regulation. **Integration** is how tied you are, as an individual, to others. One of the big challenges to the college experience, for example, is integration—feeling like you belong, that you fit in with others around you. Durkheim argued that you can have too much integration, where you feel trapped by a group, like it's inescapable. Or you can have too little integration, where you feel like you're alone, without connections to others. The important insight here is that your social ties to others have a big impact on you. You'll learn a lot more about this idea as you continue with this book.

Regulation is the idea that all groups have rules, both formal and informal. We call these rules **norms**, or expectations for our behavior. Think of the norms of a classroom for a moment. If you want to speak or ask a question, you raise your hand. If you haven't been in a classroom before, you might not know this; in fact, it's a skill many children in kindergarten have to learn. But in other settings, the norms are very different; if you're on a date and raise your hand to speak, it will almost certainly be viewed as very strange. Part of being a member of a community is learning its norms. Some community norms are extremely powerful and compelling; others are rather weak. And Durkheim thought that you could have too much regulation, or too little. He referred to the experience of too little regulation as **anomie,** a situation in which people do not have clear moral standards or social expectations to guide their behavior. The less we feel integrated into the community around us, and the faster the rules about acceptable behavior change, the more likely we are to feel anomie. If enough people experience it, entire societies can crumble, as individuals break rules, follow their own personal desires, and lose faith in the importance of the larger group.

When you read these ideas, one of the best ways to make sense of them is to apply them to your own life. How do the relationships you have with other people influence you? What are the norms of behavior in the various groups of which you are a part? Sometimes a group's norms can be so strong that it feels like a straightjacket: you can't do what you want. Sometimes norms are so weak it feels like anything goes, and you're not even sure what the group is.

Max Weber

Durkheim was particularly interested in social structures—how the forces outside us work in powerful ways. For him, sociology was the scientific study of such social influences. Other thinkers took a very different approach. **Max Weber** (1864-1920; pronounced VAY-ber) emphasized **methodological individualism**.[18] Weber was not opposed to the idea of social structures, but he argued that in order to make sense of the world it was often necessary to place the individual at the center of the analysis.

Max Weber. (Source)

Weber's own definition of sociology is one of the most famous. He thought of sociology as "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences." If that doesn't make a lot of sense to you, don't worry! What Weber meant was first, like Durkheim, he thought of sociology as a science. But where Durkheim was often most interested in the structures of a society, Weber suggested that sociology should

look at **social action**, or behaviors that produce structures. And sociologists should seek to understand the *causes* of social actions ("a causal explanation of its course and consequences"). But finally—and this is the challenging part—the kind of understanding that sociologists generate is **interpretive**. Weber means that it is important to understand the subjective meaning of actions. If you want to understand someone's behavior, you can't just say there is an objective, universal law that guides it. You need to make sense of the meaning that individuals get from and assign to that behavior. Weber understands sociology as a science, but not one like physics, which has universal laws. Because humans are involved, the science of sociology is necessarily interpretive, because we have to understand how the people involved made sense of the world. In order to understand this, let's look at one of Weber's most famous arguments.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explored one of the same questions that Marx did: where does capitalism come from?[19] Marx thought that capitalism emerged out of the previous economic system, feudalism. And he thought that economic relations were the most important factor in understanding a society. But Weber takes a more interpretive approach. Instead of looking for an objective rule to guide his explanation of human behavior, Weber looks at the subjective meanings behind the emergence of capitalism.

This approach is distinctly cultural. By **culture**, Weber means the values that people hold and that ultimately guide their social actions. Weber suggests that particular values created kinds of actions that led to the emergence of capitalism. Specifically, he argued that the cultural dynamics of Calvinism—a type of Protestantism that emerged in Europe in the 1530s—inspired church members to believe in hard work, to value economic success, and to invest what they made rather than spend it on themselves. These cultural values guided actions that resulted in capitalism. Whereas Marx believed that capitalism caused culture, Weber suggested that culture may have caused capitalism.

If we return, then, to the idea of an interpretive understanding, we see that Weber's approach to sociology means looking closely at the actions of individuals, and asking what kinds of subjective meanings they attach to those actions.

> **Review Sheet: Founders of Sociology**
>
> Key Points
> - Marx saw economic relationships as the key factor that determined how a society works. He argued that all societies were based on social conflict between different classes.
> - In a capitalist society, social conflict was primarily between capitalists and workers. Capitalists want to pay lower wages in order to make more profit; workers want higher wages and better working conditions. According to Marx, these two groups were always in conflict because of their differing economic interests.

- Marx believed that workers experienced widespread alienation, since they competed with other workers for jobs and had little control over their work conditions or what they produced.
- Durkheim emphasized the importance of solidarity. As societies became larger and more complex, he argued that they moved from mechanical solidarity, based on personal connections and integration into the community, to organic solidarity, based on dependence caused by the division of labor.
- Mechanical solidarity can make people feel they have a place in the world, but can also make them feel trapped. Societies based on mechanical solidarity can be very fragile.
- Organic solidarity can make people feel isolated and without purpose. However, it makes societies more resilient, as they don't depend on any one individual to survive.
- Integration and regulation are essential for any society to function, according to Durkheim. Without them, we can experience anomie.
- Weber argued that instead of looking at larger structures, we should focus on individual behaviors and their interpretations of their actions.

Key People
- Karl Marx
- Émile Durkheim
- Max Weber

Key Terms
- **Social conflict** – The struggle between groups that have different interests and needs.
- **Economic relationships** – How goods and resources are owned and distributed.
- **Class** – A group of people with similar positions in the economy and similar needs and interests (for example, workers).
- **Labor** – The ability to do work.
- **Wages** – Compensation for one's labor.
- **Relational sociology** – A sociological perspective that sees individuals as defined by their relationships to others and to institutions such as the economy.
- **Alienation** – The feeling of being disconnected from others, from work, and even from one's own sense of humanity.
- **Structure** – Social forces that impact individual behavior and are produced by that behavior.
- **Solidarity** – The patterns of connections between people in a society.
- **Mechanical solidarity** – Present in simple societies, where everyone is connected and the society is highly cohesive.
- **Organic solidarity** – Present in complex societies, where many members are not connected to each other personally but depend on others due to the division of labor.
- **Integration** – How tied you are to others in your community.
- **Regulation** – A society's use of rules to monitor members' actions.
- **Norms** – Expectations for behavior.

- **Anomie** – A lack of morals or social expectations to guide behavior.
- **Methodological individualism** – The perspective that individuals should be at the center of any study of society.
- **Social action** – Behaviors that produce social structures.
- **Interpretive understanding** – A perspective that focuses on the meaning that people make of their actions.
- **Culture** – According to Weber, the values people hold that guide their behavior.

AN AMERICAN TRADITION: EXPANDING SOCIOLOGY

☐ What did Jane Addams and W.E.B. DuBois see that other sociologists missed?

☐ How does adding gender and race to our analysis help us better understand society?

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim had many more contributions than those we outlined above. You could spend an entire class on any one of them. But you may have noticed something about all three: they were men, they were White, and all wrote from a European perspective. It's not an accident that these three became the most prominent scholars writing about social trends at the time. As we will learn in the coming chapters on gender, on race and ethnicity, and on inequality, a powerful set of social forces affects who is able to get the best education and who is not, whose voice is heard in public debates and whose is ignored, and who is remembered in history books and who is often forgotten.

It's important to recognize that the founding ideas of sociology did not come solely from White men in Europe. In fact, the Industrial Revolution which inspired all three men to write had perhaps its greatest impact in the United States. And many more thinkers affected how we understand that revolution, as well as the development of sociology. We don't have space to cover them all, but two of the most important were Jane Addams and William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois.

Jane Addams

Jane Addams (1860-1935) was an activist and sociologist and is considered the founder of the field of social work. She helped co-found the American Civil Liberties Union (in 1920) and was the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1931). She was one of the most important thinkers and activists of her day, and one of the most influential people in the early 1900s.

Addams performed much of her social work in Chicago. In 1871, Chicago was engulfed in flames.[20] Referred to as "the Great Fire," a major portion of the city more than four miles long and nearly a mile wide was totally destroyed. This left a third of the city's population— around 100,000 people—homeless. As the city was rebuilt, poorer residents found themselves pushed out of the city center into mostly poor, ethnic enclaves. And as the Industrial Revolution raged, more and more women found themselves destitute, unable to find decent-paying jobs to support themselves or their families.

Addams spent part of her early life traveling. Inspired by communal living situations she saw in England, she founded **Hull House** in Northwest Chicago. She envisioned Hull House as a center for social reform, where women could be educated, have support raising their children, and engage in social activism. Most important to sociology, Addams used this experience to scientifically study poverty and dependence.[21] The residents of Hull House often participated in

Jane Addams ([Source](#))

research and teaching, inspiring the earliest members of the **Chicago School of sociology**. In fact, women from Hull House regularly taught at the University of Chicago, combining moral philosophy with social statistics and a demand for empathetic understanding of the experiences and subjective understandings of the poor. Together with Addams they wrote *Hull House Maps and Papers*, which mapped the different neighborhoods of Chicago, discussed their social and moral dynamics, and described the populations that lived within them.[22] A compendium of statistical information, this work, gathered by community members as part of a participatory project, inspired scholars to use social statistics and observations to chart neighborhood dynamics. This approach would come to define the Chicago School, one of the most important traditions in sociology and one that is still important to this day.
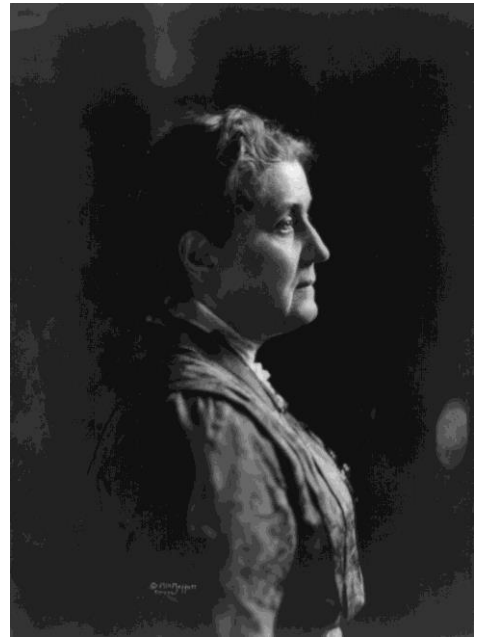
Addams drew attention to problems experienced by women in cities, to child labor, to the struggles of laboring people, and to the moral obligation to eradicate poverty. Addams, more than Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, insisted on **socially-engaged scholarship.** This meant making the people she was working to help a fundamental part of her research practice. For Addams, scholarship was not about studying other people; it meant engaging with them and learning from that experience. While she published in the leading sociological journals, Addams never held a full-time faculty position, though she was offered many.[23] Instead, she dedicated herself to teaching those who often could not receive a formal education.

Addams's socially-engaged approach to understanding and helping residents (particularly women) in the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago was not the only great American tradition of sociology. Addams's work dealt almost exclusively with White Americans. But there was another population in this nation which had long been subject to some of the worst oppression imaginable: African Americans.

Hull House in 1889. Eventually this complex contained more than 13 buildings dedicated to social reform, providing education, resources, and autonomy for some of Chicago's poor women and children. ([Source](#))

W.E.B. DuBois

Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, **W.E.B. DuBois** (pronounced doo-BOYSS) became the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University. DuBois was a sociology professor and, like Addams, a social reformer and activist. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and wrote dozens of books, many considered foundational texts in sociology.[24] DuBois spent his career at colleges and universities that served Black students (who often could not attend other institutions because of segregation), in part due his commitment to educating other African Americans and in part because racism excluded him from positions at universities that served White students.

W.E.B. DuBois. ([Source](#))

DuBois made countless contributions to American sociology, particularly in his investigation of the relationship between slavery and capitalism. No other thinker—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, or Addams—considered race to be central to the social organization of human communities. Several never considered it at all.

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, DuBois directly challenges one of Marx's central assumptions.[25] Marx believed that slavery was an old economic form from earlier civilizations, and largely incompatible with capitalism. DuBois disagreed and gathered historical and statistical evidence on the ways in which slavery and capitalism mutually reinforced one another. He argued,

> Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America.

DuBois insisted that slavery did not just impact the economy in the south. Slavery was a global system from which northern merchants and manufacturers profited, English industrialists lived, and European capitalists made their fortunes. What's more, slavery didn't just oppress African Americans; slave labor impacted White workers as well.

Slaves clothed the world with the cotton they picked and satisfied millions of tobacco addicts with the plants they grew and harvested. They did this without getting paid. But there were massive fortunes to be made by financing these goods, by trading and shipping them to faraway factories, by turning cotton into cloth, and by selling that cloth in stores. A wide array of businesses benefitted in some way from the work of slaves. What's more, White

J.J. Smith's Plantation in South Carolina (1862). ([Source])

workers' wages were undercut by southern plantation owners' use of slave labor. DuBois argued that "the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded..."[26]

According to Marx, low-paid White workers should have united with slaves to overcome their oppression. In the southern U.S. before the Civil War, DuBois noted that there were 5,000,000 Whites, of whom 2,000,000 owned at least one slave. But the vast majority of slaves were owned by just 8,000 White

families. So why didn't African American slaves and White workers band together and overthrow this small class of capitalists?

DuBois argued that economic wages are not the only factor that drives our behavior. Race matters. Sometimes, people receive non-economic wages. For example, part of the wages of being a professor are in **status**, or our relative social standing. Americans value education and tend to express admiration for those engaged in educating others and who know about the world.

And race matters. DuBois stressed that to understand White workers, you need to understand the **psychological wages** of Whiteness: that is, in a racial system, Whites get paid in things other than money. While the 8,000 southern families who owned almost all the slaves used the myth of racial inferiority to justify enslaving African Americans, White workers supported this myth because they preferred the status of being White. They accepted lower economic wages because of the psychological wages they received from feeling better than African Americans:

> …the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown to them.[27]

DuBois's work has three important implications. The first is that slavery and the growth of capitalism were interrelated. The second is that understanding social life requires looking at racial relations. Finally, DuBois recognized that economics is not necessarily the dominant value for people. Sometimes people value their status and receive psychological wages for holding a position above others in a status hierarchy, no matter how much they make in wages.

Again, we ask you to take a step back and ask how you might make sense of your own life with insights from DuBois and Addams. What socially-engaged insights have you developed in your own life? How have you learned by engaging with communities around you? What kinds of status do you value? What kinds of work would you never do, no matter how much you were paid? What kinds of work would you love to do, no matter how little you were paid? What psychological wages are important to you? And how have race and gender impacted your life?

Worker with a cotton gin. The cotton gin helped turn cotton into a massively profitable crop and supported the growth of slavery in cotton-producing states. ([Source](#))

The ideas of tomorrow: a social science at the intersections

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were all interested, fundamentally, in the same thing: how the emergence of capitalism, or industrial society, was radically changing the world. Yet they were often silent on the experiences of the vast majority of people within that world—women, non-Whites, and non-Europeans. While the major revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries were economic and political, with the emergence of capitalism and the formation of democracy, the 20th century saw a series of revolutions of its own, more civic and social. In the rest of this book you will read about many of these, from the civil rights movement to the women's movement to the fight for equality for LGBTQ+ people. These movements integrated increasingly diverse voices into sociology, voices that more broadly represent the human population and its interests and concerns.

Review Sheet: Expanding Sociology

Key Points
- Jane Addams combined scientific study of poverty with social activism intended to improve the lives of the poor.
- Addams engaged residents of Hull House in research; she and the residents influenced the development of the Chicago School of sociology, which focused on studying cities and the neighborhoods within them.
- Addams was one of the first researchers to focus on the lives of women and children.
- W.E.B. DuBois emphasized that it was impossible to understand the development of American society without taking the role of slavery and race into account. He was the first sociologist to seriously consider the role of race relations.
- DuBois pointed out that while slavery was practiced in the southern U.S., northern states and European countries benefitted from it as well, with many northerners and European capitalists making their fortunes directly or indirectly off of slavery.
- While Marx believed workers would unite to overthrow capitalists, DuBois argued that race separated White workers from Black slaves, keeping them from uniting around their common interests.
- In a racist system, even poor Whites receive symbolic benefits from their Whiteness. As a result, they continue to support a system that ultimately benefits White elites the most.

Key People
- Jane Addams
- W.E.B. DuBois

Key Terms
- **Hull House** – House founded by Jane Addams as a center for social reform to house, educate, and support poor women and their families.
- **Chicago School** – Influential group of sociologists at the University of Chicago who engaged in innovative research on cities and the patterns of how people live within them.
- **Socially-engaged scholarship** – Research that includes community members as researchers and data-gatherers and that focuses on their experiences.
- **Psychological wage** – Symbolic rewards Whites receive from a system that values Whiteness.
- **Status** – Our social standing relative to others.

A SOCIOLOGY EXPERIMENT

☐   What comes next?

We developed this resource so you can take any chapter, dive in, and help see that part of the world a little bit differently after applying the sociological imagination. But though every chapter can stand on its own, it's useful to see each chapter as part of a larger resource that contains its own logic and structure.

The first few chapters give you a lens through which to look outward, to help you start to think like sociologists. This chapter provides some orientation to what sociology is and where it came from, and the "Methods" chapter describes the tools of sociology. Methods are the approaches that sociologists take to gather evidence about how the world works, and the methods of sociology are more diverse than any other discipline in the social sciences. We then proceed with "Social Structure and the Individual," a chapter that captures perhaps the central idea of sociology: Individuals are free to make decisions and take actions, but those decisions and actions are constrained by a larger set of forces, institutions, and contexts—what the authors call the social structure. Understanding the link between the individual and social structure allows you to understand much of the core theory of sociology.

Once you're thinking like a sociologist, the next set of chapters break down how the social world works. We delve into how humans are classified, sorted, and separated into groups and categories, sometimes by choice, sometimes by force. We are sorted into occupations and groups of people with more or less power and economic resources ("Social Class, Inequality, and Poverty"), into racial and ethnic groups based on our ancestors' origins and skin tone ("Race and Ethnicity"), and into categories of "Gender and Sexuality" that are constantly changing and profoundly social in nature. All of this classification—the categories we create and our ideas, attitudes, traditions, and practices that we use to see, interpret, and change the world around us—is referred to as "Culture."

The first two parts of the book introduce you to the way sociologists think about the world and how sociology illuminates the organization of our social worlds. The remaining chapters ask you to use your sociological imagination to see our social worlds from various perspectives. We start with one of the core institutions of society, "Family"; then we consider "Education," "Religion," and the economy as a whole in "Economic Sociology." These chapters reveal how social forces affect every aspect of our lives, from our belief in an all-powerful deity to our relationships with family members to the functioning of economic markets. A sociological perspective allows us to think about how the size and layout of our homes in a residential area changes the way we interact with each other ("Urban Sociology"), how we come together to create laws and rules and to generate social change ("Politics and Social Movements"), and why those laws

and rules are broken, why norms are violated, why violence occurs and—perhaps more surprisingly—why it doesn't happen more often ("Deviance, Crime, and Violence").

The ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Addams, DuBois, and many others gave rise to a new mode of thinking, one that sits at the intersections of many different disciplines in the social sciences. But sociology reveals something that is often missed by these other disciplines. We are confident that you will come away with a new view of our social world, and a new set of ideas and tools with which to investigate it.

REFERENCES

1 Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6): 1360-1380.

2 Granovetter, Mark. 1978. "Threshold Models of Collective Behavior." *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(6): 1420-1443.

3 Mills, Charles Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

4 Associated Press. 2014, February 4. "Tennessee Judge Who Vetoed Messiah as Baby's Name Is Fired." Retrieved from https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tennessee-judge-who-vetoed-messiah-as-babys-name-is-fired/

5 Belkin, Lisa. 2009, May 12. "Laws against Baby Names." *New York Times* Parenting Blog. Retrieved from https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/a-baby-boy-named-q/

6 Shimell, Doug & Phil Houser. 2009, January 14. "Adolf Hitler Campbell, Sisters Taken from Parents." WCAU/NBC. Retrieved from https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Adolf_Hitler_Campbell__Sisters_Taken_from_Parents_Philadelphia.html

7 McKeown, Thomas 1976. *The Modern Rise of Population*. London: Edward Arnold.

8 Bongaarts John. 2009. "Human Population Growth and the Demographic Transition." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364(1532): 2985-2990.

9 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 1999. *The World at Six Billion*. New York: United Nations Population Division.

10 Harari, Yuval Noah. 2015. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: Harper Perennial.

11 Smith, Adam. 2003 [1904]. *The Wealth of Nations*. Edwin Cannan (Ed.). New York: Bantam Classic.

12 Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels. 1992. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Oxford University Press.

13 Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. New York: Penguin.

14 Marx & Engels, 1992.

15 Marx, Karl, with Friedrich Engels. 2016. *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers.

16 Durkheim, Émile. 2014. *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method*. New York: Free Press.

17 Durkheim, Émile. 2014. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.

18 Weber, Max, 1968 [1922]. *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

19 Weber, Max. 2003. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

20 Sawislak, Karen. 1995. *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

21 Addams, Jane. 1912. *Twenty Years at Hull House*. New York: Macmillan Publishers.

22 Hull House. 1895. *Hull House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, Together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing out of the Social Conditions*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.

23 For example, see Addams, Jane. 1899. "Trade Unions and Public Duty." *American Journal of Sociology*, 4(4): 448–462; Addams, Jane. 1912. "Recreation as a Public Function in Urban Communities." *American Journal of Sociology*, 17(5): 615–619.

24 For example, see DuBois, W.E.B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia: Published for the University; DuBois, W.E.B. 2018. *The Souls of Black Folk*: Essays and Sketches. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

25 DuBois, W.E.B. 2017. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York: Oxford University Press.

26 DuBois, 2017, p. 30.

27 DuBois, 2017, p. 700-701.

Cover Photo Source