

Specific Considerations for the Social Sciences

One of the first and most important things to keep in mind about sociology is that sociologists aim to explain *patterns* in society. Most of the time, a pattern will not explain every single person's experience, a fact about sociology that is both fascinating and frustrating. It is fascinating because, even though the individuals who create a pattern may not be the same over time and may not even know one another, collectively they create a pattern. Those new to sociology may find these patterns frustrating because they may believe that the patterns that describe their gender, their age, or some other facet of their lives don't really represent their experience. It's true. A pattern can exist among your cohort without your individual participation in it.

Let's consider some specific examples. One area that sociologists commonly investigate is the impact of a person's social class background on his or her experiences and lot in life. You probably wouldn't be surprised to learn that a person's social class background has an impact on his or her educational attainment and achievement. In fact, one group of researchers (Ellwood & Kane, 2000) in the early 1990s found that the percentage of children who did not receive any postsecondary schooling was four times greater among those in the lowest quartile income bracket than those in the upper quartile of income earners (i.e., children from high-income families were far more likely than low-income children to go on to college). Ellwood, D., & Kane, T. (2000). Who gets a college education? Family background and growing gaps in enrollment. In S. Danziger & J. Waldfogel (Eds.), *Securing the future* (pp. 283–324). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Another recent study found that having more liquid wealth that can be easily converted into cash actually seems to predict children's math and reading achievement (Elliott, Jung, Kim, & Chowa, 2010). Elliott, W., Jung, H., Kim, K., & Chowa, G. (2010). A multi-group structural equation model (SEM) examining asset holding effects on educational attainment by race and gender. *Journal of Children & Poverty*, 16, 91–121.

These findings, that wealth and income shape a child's educational experiences, are probably not that shocking to any of us, even if we know someone who may be an exception to the rule. Sometimes the patterns that social scientists observe fit our commonly held beliefs about the way the world works. When this happens, we don't tend to take issue with the fact that patterns don't necessarily represent all people's experiences. But what happens when the patterns disrupt our assumptions?

For example, did you know that teachers are far more likely to encourage boys to think critically in school by asking them to expand on answers they give in class and by commenting on boys' remarks and observations? When girls speak up in class, teachers are more likely to simply nod and move on. The *pattern* of teachers engaging in more complex interactions with boys means that boys and girls do not receive the same educational experience in school (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*.

New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan International. You and your classmates, both men and women, may find this news upsetting.

Objectors to these findings tend to cite evidence from their own personal experience, refuting that the pattern actually exists. The problem with this response, however, is that objecting to a social pattern on the grounds that it doesn't match one's individual experience misses the point about patterns.