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.

One final consideration that social scientists must be aware of is the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. **Qualitative methods** are ways of collecting data that yield results such as words or pictures. Some of the most common qualitative methods in sociology include field research, intensive interviews, and focus groups. **Quantitative methods**, on the other hand, result in data that can be represented by and condensed into numbers. Survey research is probably the most common quantitative method in sociology, but methods such as content analysis and interviewing can also be conducted in a way that yields quantitative data. While qualitative methods aim to gain an in-depth understanding of a relatively small number of cases, quantitative methods offer less depth but more breadth because they typically focus on a much larger number of cases.

Sometimes these two methods are presented or discussed in a way that suggests they are somehow in opposition to one another. The qualitative/quantitative debate is fueled by researchers who may prefer one approach over another, either because their own research questions are better suited to one particular approach or because they happened to have been trained in one specific method. In this text, we'll operate from the perspective that qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary rather than competing. While these two methodological approaches certainly differ, the main point is that they simply have different goals, strengths, and weaknesses. We'll explore the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of both approaches in more depth in later chapters.