
ASKING AND ANSWERING SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Learning Objectives

- Learn the steps of the research process. Name the different types of questions sociologists address in their research—factual, theoretical, comparative, and developmental.
- Contrast Park's and Ogburn's visions of sociology as a science. Understand their influence on contemporary sociological research.

Learning Objectives

- Familiarize yourself with the methods available to sociological researchers and recognize the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- Understand how research methods generate controversies and ethical dilemmas for sociologists

Today's Class

- **Why do we do Sociological Research**
- **Scientific Method**
- **Basic Concepts**
 - Learn the steps of the research process.
 - Name the different types of questions sociologists address in their research—factual, theoretical, comparative, and developmental.

Today's Class

- **Asking and Answering Sociological Questions: Historical Context**
- Contrast Park's and Ogburn's visions of sociology as a science.
- Understand their influence on contemporary sociological research.
- **Asking and Answering Sociological Questions: Research Methods**
- Familiarize yourself with the methods available to sociological researchers and know the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Why It Matters: Sociological Research

- Sociologists study society and human behavior and sometimes carry out research that will provide insightful and valuable results
- Sociologists question and analyze why things happen and if there is a way to stop a problem before it happens

- Sociology is:
 - (a) a pseudoscience.
 - (b) a science like the natural sciences.
 - (c) a science unlike the natural sciences.

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Introduction to the Scientific Method

- Sociologists rely on systematic research processes to evaluate social behavior
- Unlike “common sense”, social scientists carefully examine and investigate in order to draw accurate conclusions about society as a whole
- Sociologists utilize research methods to understand human behavior, groups, and/or aspects of society
- Research may center around groups or might detail the experiences of specific families or experiences of individuals

The Scientific Method

- Every aspect of human behavior is a source of possible investigation for sociologists, who look for patterns of behavior
- Sociologists often begin the research process by asking a question about how or why things happen before adopting an in-depth process to answer it
- A scientific process of research establishes parameters that help make sure results are objective and accurate
- The **scientific method** involves developing and testing theories about the world based on empirical evidence, striving to be objective, critical, skeptical, and logical
- The scientific method involves a series of prescribed steps established over centuries of scholarship

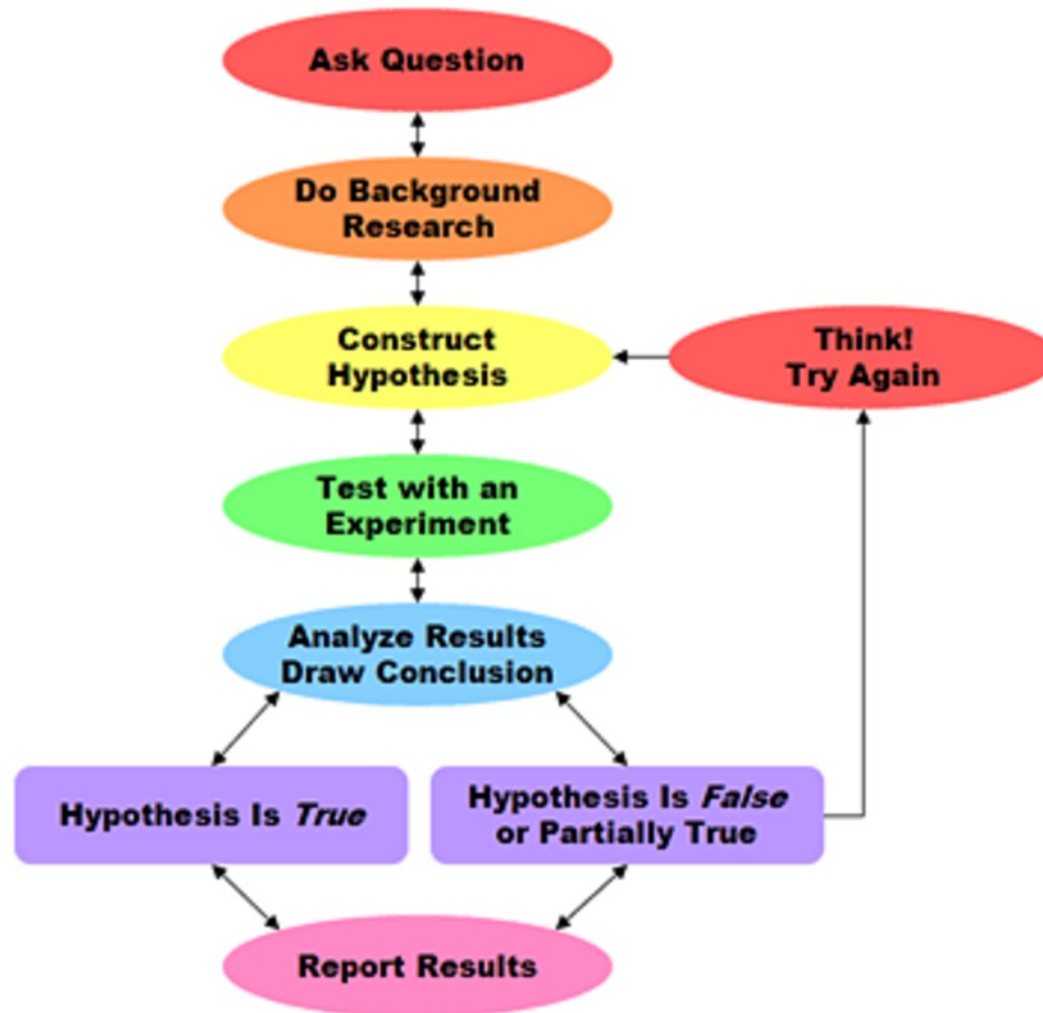
The Scientific Method, continued

- Results of studies tend to provide access to new knowledge of other cultures, rituals and beliefs, and trends and attitudes
- **Reliability** refers to how likely research results are to be replicated if the study is reproduced and increases the likelihood that what happens to one will happen to all
- When another sociologist follows another study protocols and comes up with the same results, the study is **reliable**

The Scientific Method, continued

- **Validity** refers to how well the study measures what it was designed to measure
- Sociologists can use the scientific method not only to collect but also interpret and analyze data
- The scientific method starts with asking a question, researching existing sources, and formulating a hypothesis

Scientific Method



Research Methods

- **Research methods:** The diverse methods of investigation used to gather empirical (factual) material.
- Whereas many fields have one main method, modern sociology embraces a variety of methodologies.

BASIC CONCEPTS

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Methods

- **Quantitative methods:** Approaches to sociological research that draw on objective and statistical data and often focus on documenting trends, comparing subgroups, or exploring correlations.
- **Qualitative methods:** Approaches to sociological research that often rely on personal and/or collective interviews, accounts, or observations of a person or situation.

The Research Process

1. Define the research problem.
2. Review the literature.
3. Make the problem precise.
4. Work out a design.
5. Carry out the research.
6. Interpret the results.
7. Report the findings.

Define the Research Problem

- All research starts with a research problem.
- The best sociological research begins with problems that are also puzzles.
- Rather than just answering the question “What is going on here?” skilled researchers try to illuminate why events happen as they do.

Ask a Question

- The first step of the scientific method is to ask a question, describe a problem, and identify the specific interest area
- Questions should be narrow enough to study within a geography and time frame but broad enough to have universal merit
- When forming basic research questions, sociologists develop a **operational definition**, or the concept in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it
- The operational definition should be valid, appropriate, and meaningful

Example

- What are the **gaps** in our understanding about the topic?
- What **puzzles** haven't been solved?
 - e.g. “the Hispanic Paradox”
 - The Hispanic paradox: Hispanic and Latino Americans tend to have better health compared to their U.S. white counterparts, even though Hispanics have lower average income and education.
- Is your question sociological?

Example

Is your question sociological?

- Sociological questions examine the social meaning or patterns of a phenomenon.
- It has to be social - involving groups and social structures rather than individuals only.

Which question is Sociological & Why?

- a) What treatments are effective in prolonging the lives of AIDS patients?
- b) Does having AIDS increase the likelihood a person will be depressed?
- c) Does treatment for HIV vary by social class and ethnicity?

Review the Literature

- Once a research problem is identified, the sociologist must review related research.
- Have previous researchers spotted the same puzzle?
- How have they tried to solve it?
- What aspects of the problem has their research left unanalyzed?

Research Existing Sources

- Conduct background research through a **literature review**, which is a review of any existing similar or related studies
- This step helps researchers gain a broad understanding of work previously conducted on the topic at hand and enables them to position their own research to build on prior knowledge
- Researchers are responsible for correctly citing existing sources used in a study or that inform their work
- Previously published material must be referenced properly and never plagiarized

How to find articles?

- Search key words on google scholar or top journals in your field
- Also search within top journals in Sociology & in your sub-field.
- For e.g. for Sociology: Annual Review of Sociology, Population & Development Review, Demography, Journal of Marriage & Family, Annual Journal of Sociology...
- See the most cited key work
- Also see the recent articles that have cited this work

How to identify journal rankings

- **ISI web of knowledge (Thompson Reuters)** give impact factors.
- **ISI web of knowledge gives science citation index** and the **SCI impact factor**, that is used as the real impact factor.
- **Scopus indexed** journals get a cite score and a **Scimago** quartile.
- Some other sources could be used by some journals to highlight impact factor but they are usually not reliable or used.

Make the Problem Precise

- This stage involves clearly formulating the research problem.
- **Hypotheses:** Ideas or educated guesses about a given state of affairs, put forward as bases for empirical testing.
- For the research to be effective, the researcher must formulate a hypothesis in such a way that the factual material gathered will provide evidence either supporting or disproving it.

Make the Problem Precise: Formulate a Hypothesis

- **Hypothesis:** an assumption about how two or more variables are related and makes a conjectural statement about the relationship
- The hypothesis will often predict how one form of human behavior influences another
- **Independent variables** are the cause of the change
- The **dependent variable** is the effect or thing that is changed
- In a basic study, the researcher would establish one form of human behavior as the independent variable and observe the influence it has on a dependent variable
- **Correlations** are when there is a relationship between variables but not causation

Make the Problem Precise: Formulate a Hypothesis, continued

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable
The greater the availability of affordable housing, the lower the homeless rate.	Affordable Housing	Homeless Rate
The greater the availability of math tutoring, the higher the math grades.	Math Tutoring	Math Grades
The greater the police patrol presence, the safer the neighborhood.	Police Patrol Presence	Safer Neighborhood
The greater the factory lighting, the higher the productivity.		
The greater the amount of observation, the higher the public awareness.		

Work Out a Design

- The researcher decides how to collect the research materials.
- They can choose from a range of methods based on the study objectives and the aspects of behavior under study.

Carry Out the Research

- Researchers carry out the plan developed in the previous step.
- During the actual research, unforeseen practical difficulties may arise that force the researcher to rethink his or her initial strategy.

Interpret the Results

- Once the information has been gathered, the researcher must analyze the data, track trends, and test hypotheses.
- Results must be interpreted in such a way that they tell a clear story and directly address the research puzzle outlined in the first step.

Report the Findings

- The research report, usually published as a journal article or book, provides an account of the research question, methods, findings, and the implications of the findings for social theory, public policy, or practice.
- Most reports identify unanswered questions and suggest new questions for further research.

Sociological Research

- The goal of research is to answer questions, and sociologists aim to answer questions about our social world
- **Empirical evidence** comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation
- **Meta-analysis** is a technique which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together
- **Interpretive framework** focuses on gathering information instead of designing a study and is more descriptive and narrative

Ethics

- The American Sociological Association (ASA) is the major professional organization of sociologists in North America and maintains a **code of ethics** (formal guidelines for conducting sociological research)
- The ASA consists of six principles:
 - Professional competence
 - Integrity
 - Professional and Scientific responsibility
 - Respect for people's rights, dignity and diversity
 - Social responsibility
 - Human rights



Ethics, continued

- **Hawthorne effect:** the tendency of people to act differently when they know they are being watched as part of a study
- Researchers must obtain informed consent, make results available to other sociologists, make public all sources of financial funding, and may not accept funding from organizations that might cause a conflict of interest or seek to influence results

Ethics continued

- Max Weber (1864-1920) declared that it was inappropriate to allow personal values to shape interpretation of research results and that **value neutrality**, or the practice of remaining impartial, must be established
- While it may be impossible to completely set aside values, value neutrality is striving to overcome personal biases when analyzing data and reporting results that have not be skewed to match a predetermined outcome

ASKING AND ANSWERING SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Park

- Robert Park wanted to make social research more scientific. He thought theories should be based on the careful accumulation of evidence about people's lives.
- Following Park's lead, sociologists conducted interviews and firsthand observations to see how community members lived.



William Ogburn

- William Ogburn wanted to make social research more like the natural sciences by measuring things quantitatively. He believed sociologists could study anything that could be measured with numbers.
- His goal was not “to make the world a better place in which to live” but only to “[discover] new knowledge.”



ASKING AND ANSWERING SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS TODAY: RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction to Research Methods

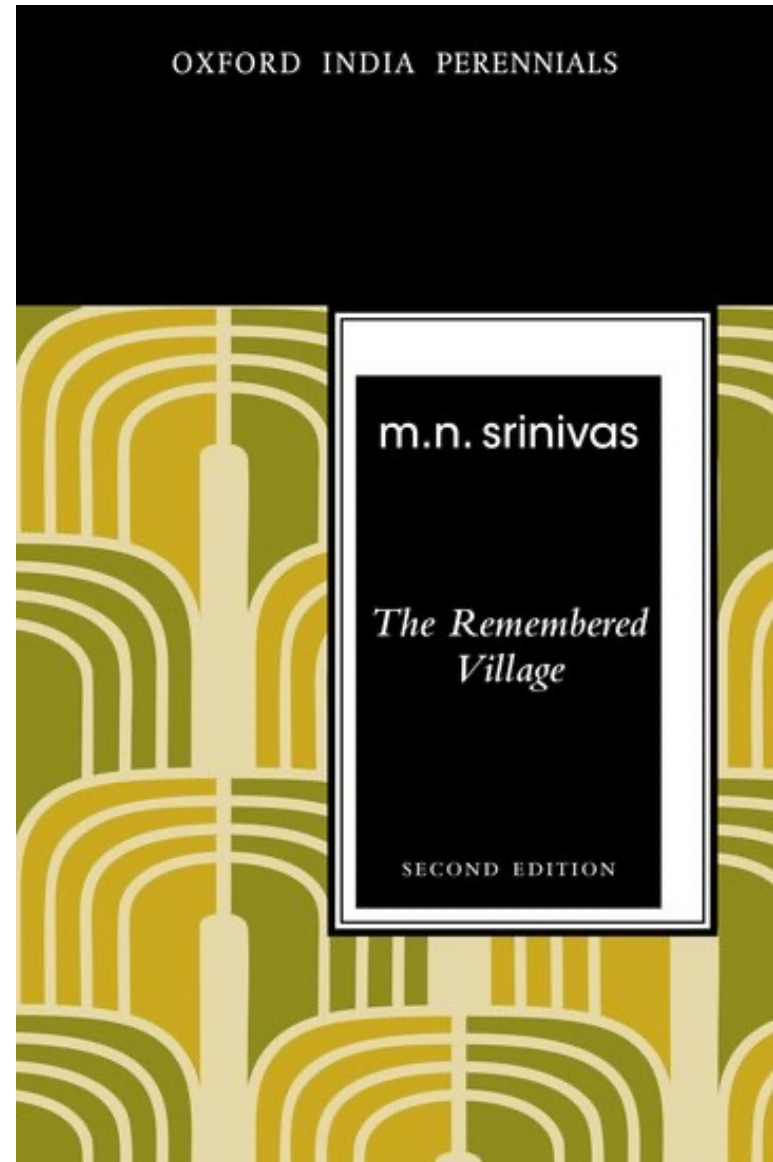
- Conducting research can be quite complex, especially when it comes to informed consent
- The “setting” in experiments is often manipulated in some way by the research team in order to examine an independent variable
- All studies shape the research design, while research design simultaneously shapes the study
- Researchers choose methods that best suit their study topics and that will fit with their overall approaches to research
- Sociologists generally choose from a variety of methods such as: survey, experiment, field research etc.

Ethnography

- **Ethnography:** The firsthand study of people using observation, in-depth interviewing, or both.
- **Participant observation:** A method of research widely used in sociology and anthropology in which the researcher takes part in the activities of the group or community being studied.
- Ethnographers cannot simply be present in the group they study; they must explain and justify their presence to its members.

Example

‘The Remembered Village is the first detailed ethnographic village study that narrates in minute detail the day-to-day social relations between members of diverse castes living in a small village community in India, & has been acknowledged as a classic by many ethnographers and anthropologists.’



Advantages of Fieldwork

- Successful ethnography provides rich information on the behavior of people in groups, as well as information on how these people understand their own behavior.
- Understanding a given group can also help us understand broader social processes.

Limitations of Fieldwork

- Interpreting ethnologies usually involves problems of generalizability.
- Only small groups can be studied.
- Reliable results depend upon the researcher gaining the confidence of his or her subjects and maintaining an objective perspective.
- Different researchers may draw different conclusions about the same group.

Surveys

- **Surveys:** A method of sociological research in which questionnaires are administered to the population being studied.
- **Population:** The people who are the focus of social research.
- Survey research produces information less detailed than that produced by an ethnography, but they can be generalized to the population as a whole.

Standardized and Open-Ended Questions

- For *standardized* or *fixed-choice* questions, only a fixed range of responses is possible for the subject. Information collected is easy to count and compare, but it may also be restrictive or misleading.
- Open-ended questions provide more detailed information, but responses may be difficult to compare statistically.
- **Pilot study:** A trial run in survey research.

Sampling

- **Sample:** A small proportion of the larger population.
- **Representative sample:** A sample from a larger population that is statistically typical of that population.
- **Sampling:** Studying a proportion of individuals or cases from a larger population as representative of that population as a whole.
- **Random sampling:** A sampling method in which a sample is chosen so that every member of the population has the same probability of being included.