How Sociologists Do Research
Cindy Hudo, a 21-year-old mother of two in Charleston, South Carolina, who was charged with the murder of her husband, Buba, said:

“I start in the car, and I get down the road, and I see Buba walking, and he’s real mad. . . . I pull over, you know, and [I said] “I didn’t know to pick you up. You know, I’m sorry.” And he didn’t even say nothing to me. He just started hitting on me. And that’s all I wanted to do, was just get home, because I was just self-conscious. I don’t want nobody to see him hitting me, because I didn’t want him to look bad.

I had to go to work in a half-hour, because I was working a double-shift. And he told me I had forty minutes to get all my furniture out of the house and get my clothes and be out or he was going to throw them out. And I was sitting there, because I could talk him down. You know, because I didn’t want to leave him. I just talked to him. I said, “Buba, I don’t want to leave.” I said, “This is my house.” And then he told me . . . (unclear) . . . “my kids.” And I said, “No, you’re not taking my kids from me. That’s too much.” And so I said, “Just let me leave. Just let me take the kids. And, you know I’ll go, and you know, I won’t keep the kids from you or nothing like that.” And he said, “I’m going to take them, and you’re getting out.”

[After they went inside their trailer, Buba threatened to shoot Cindy. He loaded a shotgun, pointed it at her, and said]: “The only way you’re going to get out of this is if you kill me, and I’ll—I’ll kill you.” [Buba gave me the shotgun and] turned around and walked right down the hall, because he knew I wouldn’t do nothing. And I just sat there a minute. And I don’t know what happened. I just, you know, I went to the bedroom, and I seen him laying there, and I just shot him. He moved. I shot him again because I thought he was going to get up again. . . . I loved him too much. And I just wanted to help him.

Source: Transcript, ABC Television, 20/20, October 18, 1979.
What Is a Valid Sociological Topic?

Sociologists do research on just about every area of human behavior. On the macro level, they study such broad matters as race relations (Schaefer 2008), the military (Caforio 2006), and multinational corporations (Kristensen and Morgan 2006). On the micro level, they study such individualistic matters as pelvic examinations (Henslin and Biggs 1971/2007), how people interact on street corners (Whyte 1989, 2001), and even shyness (Scott 2006). Sociologists study priests and prostitutes, cops and criminals, as well as all kinds of people in between. In fact, no human behavior is ineligible for sociological scrutiny—whether that behavior is routine or unusual, respectable or reprehensible.

What happened to Cindy and Buba, then, is also a valid topic of sociological research. But exactly how would you research spouse abuse? As we look at how sociologists do research, we shall try to answer this question.

Common Sense and the Need for Sociological Research

First, why do we need sociological research? Why can’t we simply depend on common sense, on “what everyone knows”? As noted in Chapter 1 (page 8), commonsense ideas may or may not be true. Common sense, for example, tells us that spouse abuse has a significant impact on the lives of the people who are abused.

Although this particular idea is accurate, we need research to test commonsense ideas, because not all such ideas are true. After all, common sense also tells us that if a woman is abused, she will pack up and leave her husband. Research, however, shows that the reality of abuse is much more complicated than this. Some women do leave right away, some even after the first incident of abuse. For a variety of reasons, however, some women suffer abuse for years. The main reason is that they feel trapped and don’t perceive any viable alternatives.

This brings us to the need for sociological research, for we may want to know why some women put up with abuse, while others don’t. Or we may want to know something entirely different, such as why men are more likely to be the abusers. Or why some people abuse the people they say they love.

In order to answer a question, we need to move beyond guesswork and common sense. We want to know what is really going on. To find out, sociologists do research on about every aspect of social life. Let’s look at how they do their research.

A Research Model

As shown in Figure 5.1 on the next page, scientific research follows eight basic steps. This is an ideal model, however, and in the real world of research some of these steps may run together. Some may even be omitted.

1. Selecting a Topic

The first step is to select a topic. What do you want to know more about? Many sociologists simply follow their curiosity, their drive to learn more about social life. They become interested in a particular topic and they pursue it, as I did in studying the homeless. Some sociologists choose a topic because funding is available for that topic, others because a social problem such as domestic violence is in the news and they want to help people better understand it—and perhaps to help solve it. Let’s use spouse abuse as our example.
2. Defining the Problem

The second step is to define the problem, to specify what you want to learn about the topic. My interest in the homeless increased until I wanted to learn about homelessness across the nation. Ordinarily, sociologists’ interests are much more focused than this; they examine some specific aspect of the topic, such as how homeless people survive on the streets. In the case of spouse abuse, sociologists may want to know whether violent and nonviolent husbands have different work experiences. Or they may want to learn what can be done to reduce spouse abuse.

The topics that sociologists study are far-ranging. In fact, sociologists do research on any aspect of social life that interests them. The “problem” can be as earth shaking as trying to figure out why nations would ever contemplate nuclear war, as perplexing as understanding how “good” people can torture and kill (see Chapter 15), or as simple as wanting to find out why Native Americans like Westerns (see the Mass Media in Social Life box on page 53).

3. Reviewing the Literature

You must read what has been published on your topic. This helps you to narrow the problem, identify areas that are already known, and learn what areas need to be researched. Reviewing the literature may also help you to pinpoint the questions that you will ask. You might even find out that the problem has been answered already. You don’t want to waste your time rediscovering what is already known.

4. Formulating a Hypothesis

The fourth step is to formulate a hypothesis, a statement of what you expect to find according to predictions from a theory. A hypothesis predicts a relationship between or among variables, factors that change, or vary, from one person or situation to another. For example, the statement “Men who are more socially isolated are more likely to abuse their wives than are men who are more socially integrated” is a hypothesis.

Your hypothesis will need operational definitions—that is, precise ways to measure the variables. In this example, you would need operational definitions for three variables: social isolation, social integration, and spouse abuse.

5. Choosing a Research Method

You then need to decide how you are going to collect your data. Sociologists use seven basic research methods (or research designs), which are outlined in the next section. You will want to choose the research method that will best answer your particular questions.

6. Collecting the Data

When you gather your data, you have to take care to assure their validity; that is, your operational definitions must measure what they are intended to measure. In this case, you must be certain that you really are measuring social isolation, social integration, and spouse abuse—and not something else. Spouse abuse, for example, seems to be obvious. Yet what some people consider to be abuse is not regarded as abuse by others. Which definition will you choose? In other words, you must state your operational definitions so precisely that no one has any question about what you are measuring.

You must also be sure that your data are reliable. Reliability means that if other researchers use your operational definitions, their findings will be consistent with yours. If
your operational definitions are sloppy, husbands who have committed the same act of violence might be included in some research but excluded from other studies. You would end up with erratic results. If you show a 10 percent rate of spouse abuse, for example, but another researcher using the same operational definitions determines it to be 30 percent, the research is unreliable.

7. Analyzing the Results

You can choose from a variety of techniques to analyze the data you gather. If a hypothesis has been part of your research, now is when you will test it. (Some research, especially participant observation and case studies, has no hypothesis. You may know so little about the setting you are going to research that you cannot even specify the variables in advance.)

With today’s software, in just seconds you can run tests on your data that used to take days or even weeks to perform. Two basic programs that sociologists and many undergraduates use are Microcase and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Some software, such as the Methodologist’s Toolchest, provides advice about collecting data and even about ethical issues.

8. Sharing the Results

To wrap up your research, you will write a report to share your findings with the scientific community. You will review how you did your research, including your operational definitions. You will also show how your findings fit in with what has already been published on the topic and how they support or disagree with the theories that apply to your topic.

When research is published, usually in a scientific journal or a book, it “belongs” to the scientific community. Your findings will be available for replication; that is, others can repeat your study to see if they come up with similar results. As Table 5.1 on the next page illustrates, sociologists often summarize their findings in tables. As finding is added to finding, scientific knowledge builds.

Let’s look in greater detail at the fifth step to see what research methods sociologists use.

Research Methods

As we review the seven research methods (or research designs) that sociologists use, we will continue our example of spouse abuse. As you will see, the method you choose will depend on the questions you want to answer. So that you can have a yardstick for comparison, you will want to know what “average” is in your study. Table 5.2 on page 130 discusses ways to measure average.

Surveys

Let’s suppose that you want to know how many wives are abused each year. Some husbands also are abused, of course, but let’s assume that you are going to focus on wives. An appropriate method for this purpose would be the survey, in which you would ask individuals a series of questions. Before you begin your research, however, you must deal with practical matters that face all researchers. Let’s look at these issues.
### TABLE 5.1 How to Read a Table

Tables summarize information. Because sociological findings are often presented in tables, it is important to understand how to read them. Tables contain six elements: title, headnote, headings, columns, rows, and source. When you understand how these elements fit together, you know how to read a table.

#### 1. The **title** states the topic. It is located at the top of the table. What is the title of this table? Please determine your answer before looking at the correct answer at the bottom of this page.

#### 2. The **headnote** is not always included in a table. When it is, it is located just below the title. Its purpose is to give more detailed information about how the data were collected or how data are presented in the table. What are the first eight words of the headnote of this table?

#### 3. The **headings** tell what kind of information is contained in the table. There are three headings in this table. What are they? In the second heading, what does \( n = 25 \) mean?

#### 4. The **columns** present information arranged vertically. What is the fourth number in the second column and the second number in the third column?

#### 5. The **rows** present information arranged horizontally. In the fourth row, which husbands are more likely to have less education than their wives?

#### 6. The **source** of a table, usually listed at the bottom, provides information on where the data in the table originated. Often, as in this instance, the information is specific enough for you to consult the original source. What is the source for this table?

---

**Comparing Violent and Nonviolent Husbands**

Based on interviews with 150 husbands and wives in a Midwestern city who were getting a divorce.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband’s Achievement and Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Violent Husbands</th>
<th>Nonviolent Husbands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He started but failed to complete high school or college</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is very dissatisfied with his job</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His income is a source of constant conflict</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has less education than his wife</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His job has less prestige than his father-in-law’s</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Modification of Table 1 in O’Brien 1975.

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Some tables are much more complicated than this one, but all follow the same basic pattern. To apply these concepts to a table with more information, see page 352.

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**Selecting a Sample.** Ideally, you might want to learn about all wives in the world. Obviously, your resources will not permit such research, and you will have to narrow your **population**, the target group that you are going to study.

Let’s assume that your resources (money, assistants, time) allow you to investigate spouse abuse only on your campus. Let’s also assume that your college enrollment is large, so you won’t be able to survey all the married women who are enrolled. Now you must...
Select a sample, individuals from among your target population. How you choose a sample is crucial, for your choice will affect the results of your research. For example, married women enrolled in introductory sociology and engineering courses might have quite different experiences. If so, surveying just one or the other would produce skewed results. Because you want to generalize your findings to your entire campus, you need a sample that accurately represents the campus. How can you get a representative sample? The best way is to use a random sample.

This does not mean that you stand on some campus corner and ask questions of any woman who happens to walk by. In a random sample, everyone in your population (the target group) has the same chance of being included in the study. In this case, because your population is every married woman enrolled in your college, all married women—whether first-year or graduate students, full- or part-time—must have the same chance of being included in your sample.

How can you get a random sample? First, you need a list of all the married women enrolled in your college. Then you assign a number to each name on the list. Using a table of random numbers, you then determine which of these women will become part of your sample. (Tables of random numbers are available in statistics books and online, or they can be generated by a computer.)

A random sample will represent your study’s population fairly—in this case, married women enrolled at your college. This means that you can generalize your findings to all the married women students on your campus, even if they were not included in your sample.

**TABLE 5.2 Three Ways to Measure “Average”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Mean</th>
<th>The Median</th>
<th>The Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The term average seems clear enough. As you learned in grade school, to find the average you add a group of numbers and then divide the total by the number of cases that you added. Assume that the following numbers represent men convicted of battering their wives:</td>
<td>To compute the second average, the median, first arrange the cases in order—either from the highest to the lowest or the lowest to the highest. That arrangement will produce the following distribution.</td>
<td>The third measure of average, the mode, is simply the cases that occur the most often. In this instance the mode is 57, which is way off the mark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>321</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>229</td>
<td>1,795</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>289</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>1,795</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The total is 2,884. Divided by 7 (the number of cases), the average is 412. Sociologists call this form of average the mean. The mean can be deceptive because it is strongly influenced by extreme scores, either low or high. Note that six of the seven cases are less than the mean. Two other ways to compute averages are the median and the mode.</td>
<td>Then look for the middle case, the one that falls halfway between the top and the bottom. That number is 229, for three numbers are lower and three numbers are higher. When there is an even number of cases, the median is the halfway mark between the two middle cases.</td>
<td>Because the mode is often deceptive, and only by chance comes close to either of the other two averages, sociologists seldom use it. In addition, not every distribution of cases has a mode. And if two or more numbers appear with the same frequency, you can have more than one mode.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXAMPLE</strong></td>
<td><strong>EXAMPLE</strong></td>
<td><strong>EXAMPLE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>321</td>
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<td>136</td>
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<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>1,795</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What if you want to know only about certain subgroups, such as freshmen and seniors? You could use a **stratified random sample**. You would need a list of the married women in the freshman and senior classes. Then, using random numbers, you would select a sample from each group. This would allow you to generalize to all the freshman and senior married women at your college, but you would not be able to draw any conclusions about the sophomores or juniors.

**Asking Neutral Questions.** After you have decided on your population and sample, your next task is to make certain that your questions are neutral. Your questions must allow respondents, the people who answer your questions, to express their own opinions. Otherwise, you will end up with biased answers—which are worthless. For example, if you were to ask, “Don’t you think that men who beat their wives should go to prison?” you would be tilting the answer toward agreement with a prison sentence. The Doonesbury cartoon below illustrates another blatant example of biased questions. For examples of flawed research, see the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

**Questionnaires and Interviews.** Even if you have a representative sample and ask neutral questions, you can still end up with biased findings. Questionnaires, the list of questions to be asked, can be administered in ways that are flawed. There are two basic techniques for administering questionnaires. The first is to ask the respondents to fill them out. These self-administered questionnaires allow a larger number of people to be sampled at a lower cost, but the researchers lose control of the data collection. They don’t know the conditions under which people answered the questions. For example, others could have influenced their answers.

The second technique is the interview. Researchers ask people questions, often face to face, sometimes by telephone or e-mail. The advantage of this method is that the researchers can ask each question in the same way. The main disadvantage is that interviews are time-consuming, so researchers end up with fewer respondents. Interviews can also create interviewer bias; that is, the presence of interviewers can affect what people say. For example, instead of saying what they really feel, respondents might give “socially acceptable” answers. Although they may be willing to write their true opinions on an anonymous questionnaire, they won’t tell them to another person. Some respondents even shape their answers to match what they think an interviewer wants to hear.

In some cases, structured interviews work best. This type of interview uses closed-ended questions—each question is followed by a list of possible answers. Structured interviews are faster to administer, and they make it easier to code (categorize) answers so

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**improperly worded questions** can steer respondents toward answers that are not their own, which produces invalid results.

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Sociologists usually cannot interview or observe every member of a group or participant in an event that they want to study. As explained in the text, to be able to generalize their findings, they select samples. Sociologists would have several ways to study this protest in San Francisco against U.S. foreign policy.
Loading the Dice: How Not to Do Research

The methods of science lend themselves to distortion, misrepresentation, and downright fraud. Consider these findings from surveys:

Americans overwhelmingly prefer Toyotas to Chryslers. Americans overwhelmingly prefer Chryslers to Toyotas.

Obviously, these opposite conclusions cannot both be true. In fact, both sets of findings are misrepresentations, even though the responses came from surveys conducted by so-called independent researchers. These researchers, however, are biased, not independent and objective.

It turns out that some consumer researchers load the dice. Hired by firms that have a vested interest in the outcome of the research, they deliver the results their clients are looking for (Armstrong 2007). Here are six ways to load the dice.

1. Choose a biased sample. If you want to "prove" that Americans prefer Chryslers over Toyotas, interview unemployed union workers who trace their job loss to Japanese imports. The answer is predictable. You'll get what you're looking for.

2. Ask biased questions. Even if you choose an unbiased sample, you can phrase questions in such a way that you direct people to the answer you're looking for. Suppose that you ask this question:

We are losing millions of jobs to workers overseas who work for just a few dollars a day. After losing their jobs, some Americans are even homeless and hungry. Do you prefer a car that gives jobs to Americans, or one that forces our workers to lose their homes?

This question is obviously designed to channel people's thinking toward a predetermined answer—quite contrary to the standards of scientific research. Look again at the Doonesbury cartoon on page 131.

3. List biased choices. Another way to load the dice is to use closed-ended questions that push people into the answers you want. Consider this finding:

U.S. college students overwhelmingly prefer Levis 501 to the jeans of any competitor.

Sound good? Before you rush out to buy Levis, note what these researchers did: In asking students which jeans would be the most popular in the coming year, their list of choices included no other jeans but Levis 501!

4. Discard undesirable results. Researchers can keep silent about results they find embarrassing, or they can continue to survey samples until they find one that matches what they are looking for. As has been stressed in this chapter, research must be objective if it is to be scientific. Obviously, none of the preceding results qualifies. The underlying problem with the research cited here—and with so many surveys bandied about in the media as fact—is that survey research has become big business. Simply put, the money offered by corporations has corrupted some researchers.

The beginning of the corruption is subtle. Paul Light, dean at the University of Minnesota, put it this way: "A funder will never come to an academic and say, 'I want you to produce finding X, and here's a million dollars to do it.' Rather, the subtext is that if the researchers produce the right finding, more work—and funding—will come their way."

The first four sources of bias are inexcusable, intentional fraud. The next two sources of bias reflect sloppiness, which is also inexcusable in science.

5. Misunderstand the subjects' world. This route can lead to errors every bit as great as those just cited. Even researchers who use an adequate sample and word their questions properly can end up with skewed results. They may, for example, fail to anticipate that people may be embarrassed to express an opinion that isn't "politically correct." For example, surveys show that 80 percent of Americans are environmentalists. Most Americans, however, are probably embarrassed to tell a stranger otherwise. Today, that would be like going against the flag, motherhood, and apple pie.

6. Analyze the data incorrectly. Even when researchers strive for objectivity, the sample is good, the wording is neutral, and the respondents answer the questions honestly, the results can still be skewed. The researchers may make a mistake in their calculations, such as entering incorrect data into computers. This, too, of course, is inexcusable in science.

they can be fed into a computer for analysis. As you can see from Table 5.3, the answers listed on a questionnaire might fail to include the respondent’s opinions. Consequently, some researchers prefer unstructured interviews. Here the interviewer asks open-ended questions, which allow people to answer in their own words. Open-ended questions allow you to tap the full range of people’s opinions, but they make it difficult to compare answers. For example, how would you compare the following answers to the question “Why do you think men abuse their wives?”

“They’re sick.”
“I think they must have had problems with their mother.”
“We oughta string ‘em up!”

Establishing Rapport. Research on spouse abuse brings up another significant issue. You may have been wondering if your survey would be worth anything even if you rigorously followed scientific procedures. Will women who have been abused really give honest answers to strangers?

If your method of interviewing consisted of walking up to women on the street and asking if their husbands had ever beaten them, there would be little basis for taking your findings seriously. Researchers have to establish rapport (“ruh-POUR”), a feeling of trust, with their respondents, especially when it comes to sensitive topics—those that elicit feelings of embarrassment, shame, or other deep emotions.

We know that once rapport is gained (often by first asking nonsensitive questions), victims will talk about personal, sensitive issues. A good example is rape. To go beyond police statistics, each year researchers interview a random sample of 100,000 Americans. They ask them whether they have been victims of burglary, robbery, or other crimes. After establishing rapport, the researchers ask about rape. They find that rape victims will talk about their experiences. The National Crime Victimization Survey shows that the actual incidence of rape is about 40 percent higher than the number reported to the police—and that attempted rapes are nine times higher than the official statistics (Statistical Abstract 2009:Tables 303, 304).

A new technique to gather data on sensitive areas, Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing, overcomes lingering problems of distrust. In this technique, the interviewer gives a laptop computer to the respondent, then moves aside, while the individual enters his or her own answers into the computer. In some versions of this method, the respondent listens to the questions on a headphone and answers them on the computer screen. When the respondent clicks the “Submit” button, the interviewer has no idea how the respondent answered any question (Mosher et al. 2005).

Participant Observation (Fieldwork)

In the second method, participant observation (or fieldwork), the researcher participates in a research setting while observing what is happening in that setting. But how is it possible to study spouse abuse by participant observation? Obviously, this method does not mean that you would sit around and watch someone being abused. Spouse abuse, however, is a broad topic, and many questions about abuse cannot be answered adequately by any method other than participant observation.

Let’s suppose that you are interested in learning how spouse abuse affects wives. You might want to know how the abuse has changed the wives’ relationship with their husbands. How has it changed their hopes and dreams? Or their ideas about men? Certainly it has affected their self-concept as well. But how? Participant observation could provide insight into such questions.

For example, if your campus has a crisis intervention center, you might be able to observe victims of spouse abuse from the time they report the attack through their participation in counseling. With good rapport, you might even be able to spend time with them in other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5.3</th>
<th>Closed and Open–Ended Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Closed–Ended Question</strong></td>
<td><strong>B. Open–Ended Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following best fits your idea of what should be done to someone who has been convicted of spouse abuse?</td>
<td>What do you think should be done to someone who has been convicted of spouse abuse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. probation</td>
<td>1. probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. jail time</td>
<td>2. jail time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. community service</td>
<td>3. community service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. counseling</td>
<td>4. counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. divorce</td>
<td>5. divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. nothing—it’s a family matter</td>
<td>6. nothing—it’s a family matter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

unstructured interviews interviews that use open-ended questions
open-ended questions questions that respondents answer in their own words
rapport (ruh-POUR) a feeling of trust between researchers and the people they are studying
participant observation (or fieldwork) research in which the researcher participates in a research setting while observing what is happening in that setting
settings, observing further aspects of their lives. What they say and how they interact with others might help you to understand how the abuse has affected them. This, in turn, could give you insight into how to improve college counseling services.

Participant observers face two major dilemmas. The first is **generalizability**, the extent to which their findings apply to larger populations. Most participant observation studies are exploratory, documenting in detail the experiences of people in a particular setting. Although such research suggests that other people who face similar situations react in similar ways, we don’t know how far the findings apply beyond their original setting. Participant observation, however, can stimulate hypotheses and theories that can be tested in other settings, using other research techniques. A second dilemma is the extent to which the participant observers should get involved in the lives of the people they are observing. Consider this as you read the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

**Case Studies**

To do a **case study**, the researcher focuses on a single event, situation, or even individual. The purpose is to understand the dynamics of relationships, power, or even the thought processes that led to some particular event. Sociologist Ken Levi (2009), for example, wanted to study hit men. He would have loved to have had a large number of hit men to interview, but he had access to only one. He interviewed this man over and over again, giving us an understanding of how someone can kill others for money. Sociologist Kai Erikson (1978), who became intrigued with the bursting of a dam in West Virginia that killed several hundred people, focused on the events that led up to and followed this disaster. For spouse abuse, a case study would focus on a single wife and husband, exploring the couple's history and relationship.

As you can see, the case study reveals a lot of detail about some particular situation, but the question always remains: How much of this detail applies to other situations? This problem of generalizability, which plagues case studies, is the primary reason that few sociologists use this method.

**Secondary Analysis**

In **secondary analysis**, a fourth research method, researchers analyze data that others have collected. For example, if you were to analyze the original interviews from a study of women who had been abused by their husbands, you would be doing secondary analysis. Ordinarily, researchers prefer to gather their own data, but lack of resources, especially money, may make this impossible. In addition, existing data could contain a wealth of information that wasn’t pertinent to the goals of the original researchers, which you can analyze for your own purposes.

Like the other methods, secondary analysis also poses its own problems. How can a researcher who did not carry out the initial study be sure that the data were gathered systematically and recorded accurately and that biases were avoided? This problem plagues researchers who do secondary analysis, especially if the original data were gathered by a team of researchers, not all of whom were equally qualified.

**Documents**

The fifth method that sociologists use is the study of **documents**, recorded sources. To investigate social life, sociologists examine such diverse documents as books, newspapers, diaries, bank records, police reports, immigration files, and records kept by organizations. The term **documents** is broad, and it also includes video and audio recordings.

To study spouse abuse, you might examine police reports and court records. These could reveal what percentage of complaints result in arrest and what proportion of the men arrested are charged, convicted, or put on probation. If these were your questions, police statistics would be valuable (Kingsnorth and MacIntosh 2007).
Next to the University of Chicago is an area of poverty so dangerous that the professors warn students to avoid it. One of the graduate students in sociology, Sudhir Venkatesh, the son of immigrants from India, who was working on a research project with William Julius Wilson, decided to ignore the warning.

With clipboard in hand, Sudhir entered “the projects.” Ignoring the glares of the young men standing around, he went into the lobby of a high-rise. Seeing a gaping hole where the elevator was supposed to be, he decided to climb the stairs, where he was almost overpowered by the smell of urine. After climbing five flights, Sudhir came upon some young men shooting craps in a dark hallway. One of them jumped up, grabbed Sudhir’s clipboard, and demanded to know what he was doing there.

Sudhir blurted, “I’m a student at the university, doing a survey, and I’m looking for some families to interview.”

One man took out a knife and began to twirl it. Another pulled out a gun, pointed it at Sudhir’s head, and said, “I’ll take him.”

Then came a series of rapid-fire questions that Sudhir couldn’t answer. He had no idea what they meant: “You flip right or left? Five or six? You run with the Kings, right?”

Grabbing Sudhir’s bag, two of the men searched it. They could find only questionnaires, pen and paper, and a few sociology books. The man with the gun then told Sudhir to go ahead and ask him a question.

Sweating despite the cold, Sudhir read the first question on his survey, “How does it feel to be black and poor?” Then he read the multiple-choice answers: “Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good.”

As you might surmise, the man’s answer was too obscenity laden to be printed here.

As Sudhir got out of his predicament in the stairwell, his immersion into a threatening underworld—the daily life for many people in “the projects”—and his moral dilemma at witnessing so many crimes are part of his fascinating experience in doing participant observation of the Black Kings.

Sudhir, who was reared in a middle-class suburb in California, even took over this Chicago gang for a day. This is one reason that he calls himself a rogue sociologist—the decisions he made that day were serious violations of law, felonies that could bring years in prison. There are other reasons, too: During the research, he kicked a man in the stomach, and he was present as the gang planned drive-by shootings.

Sudhir eventually completed his Ph.D., and he now teaches at Columbia University.

Based on Venkatesh 2008.
The research methods that sociologists choose depend partially on the questions they want to answer. They might want to learn, for example, which forms of publicity are more effective in increasing awareness of spouse abuse as a social problem.

relationships change. If no diaries were available, you might ask victims to keep diaries. Perhaps the director of a crisis intervention center might ask clients to keep diaries for you—or get the victims’ permission for you to examine records of their counseling sessions. To my knowledge, no sociologist has yet studied spouse abuse in this way.

Of course, I am presenting an ideal situation, a crisis intervention center that opens its arms to you. In actuality, the center might not cooperate at all. It might refuse to ask victims to keep diaries—or it might not even let you near its records. Access, then, is another problem that researchers face. Simply put, you can’t study a topic unless you can gain access to it.

Experiments

Do you think there is a way to change a man who abuses his wife into a loving husband? No one has made this claim, but a lot of people say that abusers need therapy. Yet no one knows whether therapy really works. Because experiments are useful for determining cause and effect (discussed in Table 5.4 on the next page), let’s suppose that you propose an experiment to a judge and she gives you access to men who have been arrested for spouse abuse. As in Figure 5.2 below, you would randomly divide the men into two groups. This helps to ensure that their individual characteristics (attitudes, number of arrests, severity of crimes, education, race–ethnicity, age, and so on) are distributed evenly between the groups. You then would arrange for the men in the experimental group to receive some form of therapy. The men in the control group would not get therapy.

**FIGURE 5.2 The Experiment**
The second necessary condition is not that it is the only causal cause. Either variable could be the cause of the other. Perhaps battering upsets men and they then get drunk.

The third necessary condition is no spurious correlation. This is the necessary condition that really makes things difficult. Even if we identify the correlation of getting drunk and spouse abuse and can determine temporal priority, we still don’t know that alcohol abuse is the cause. We could have a spurious correlation; that is, the cause may be some underlying third variable. These are usually not easy to identify. Some sociologists think that male culture is that underlying third variable.

Socialized into dominance, some men learn to view women as objects on which to take out their frustration. In fact, this underlying third variable could be a cause of both spouse abuse and alcohol abuse.

### TABLE 5.4 Cause, Effect, and Spurious Correlations

**Causation** means that a change in one variable is caused by another variable. Three conditions are necessary for causation: correlation, temporal priority, and no spurious correlation. Let’s apply each of these conditions to spouse abuse and alcohol abuse.

1. **The first necessary condition is correlation.** If two variables exist together, they are said to be correlated. If batterers get drunk, battering and alcohol abuse are correlated.

   **Spouse Abuse + Alcohol Abuse**

   People sometimes assume that correlation is causation. In this instance, they conclude that alcohol abuse causes spouse abuse.

   **Alcohol Abuse → Spouse Abuse**

   But correlation never proves causation. Either variable could be the cause of the other. Perhaps battering upsets men and they then get drunk.

   **Spouse Abuse → Alcohol Abuse**

2. **The second necessary condition is temporal priority.** Temporal priority means that one thing happens before something else does. For a variable to be a cause (the independent variable), it must precede that which is changed (the dependent variable).

   **Alcohol Abuse → Spouse Abuse**

   If the men had not drunk alcohol until after they beat their wives, obviously alcohol abuse could not be the cause of the spouse abuse. Although the necessity of temporal priority is obvious, in many studies this is not easy to determine.

3. **The third necessary condition is no spurious correlation.** This is the necessary condition that really makes things difficult. Even if we identify the correlation of getting drunk and spouse abuse and can determine temporal priority, we still don’t know that alcohol abuse is the cause. We could have a spurious correlation; that is, the cause may be some underlying third variable. These are usually not easy to identify. Some sociologists think that male culture is that underlying third variable.

   **Male Culture → Spouse Abuse**

   Socialized into dominance, some men learn to view women as objects on which to take out their frustration. In fact, this underlying third variable could be a cause of both spouse abuse and alcohol abuse.

**Male Culture**

But since only some men beat their wives, while all males are exposed to male culture, other variables must also be involved. Perhaps specific subcultures that promote violence and denigrate women lead to both spouse abuse and alcohol abuse.

**Male Subculture**

If so, this does not mean that it is the only causal variable, for spouse abuse probably has many causes. Unlike the movement of amoebas or the action of heat on some object, human behavior is infinitely complicated. Especially important are people’s definitions of the situation, including their views of right and wrong. To explain spouse abuse, then, we need to add such variables as the ways that men view violence and their ideas about the relative rights of women and men. It is precisely to help unravel such complicating factors in human behavior that we need the experimental method.

**Correlation** simply means that two or more variables are present together. The more often that these variables are found together, the stronger their relationship. To indicate their strength, sociologists use a number called a correlation coefficient. If two variables are always related, that is, they are always present together, they have what is called a perfect positive correlation. The number 1.0 represents this correlation coefficient. Nature has some 1.0’s, such as the lack of water and the death of trees. 1.0’s also apply to the human physical state, such as the absence of nutrients and the absence of life. But social life is much more complicated than physical conditions, and there are no 1.0’s in human behavior.

Two variables can also have a perfect negative correlation. This means that when one variable is present, the other is always absent. The number –1.0 represents this correlation coefficient.

Positive correlations of 0.1, 0.2, and 0.3 mean that one variable is associated with another only 1 time out of 10, 2 times out of 10, and 3 times out of 10. In other words, in most instances the first variable is not associated with the second, indicating a weak relationship. A strong relationship may indicate causation, but not necessarily. Testing the relationship between variables is the goal of some sociological research.

**Spouse Abuse**

Alcohol Abuse

Spouse Abuse

Alcohol Abuse

Spouse Abuse + Alcohol Abuse

Male Culture

Spouse Abuse

Male Subculture

Spouse Abuse

Alcohol Abuse
Your **independent variable**, something that causes a change in another variable, would be therapy. Your **dependent variable**, the variable that might change, would be the men’s behavior: whether they abuse women after they get out of jail. Unfortunately, your operational definition of the men’s behavior will be sloppy: either reports from the wives or records indicating which men were rearrested for abuse. This is sloppy because some of the women will not report the abuse, and some of the men who abuse their wives will not be arrested. Yet it may be the best you can do.

Let’s assume that you choose rearrest as your operational definition. If you find that the men who received therapy are **less** likely to be rearrested for abuse, you can attribute the difference to the therapy. If you find **no difference** in rearrest rates, you can conclude that the therapy was ineffective. If you find that the men who received the therapy have a **higher** rearrest rate, you can conclude that the therapy backfired.

Ideally, you would test different types of therapy. Perhaps only some types work. You might even want to test self-therapy by assigning articles, books, and videos.

### Unobtrusive Measures

Researchers sometimes use **unobtrusive measures**, observing the behavior of people who are not aware that they are being studied. For example, social researchers studied the level of whisky consumption in a town that was legally “dry” by counting empty bottles in trashcans (Lee 2000). Researchers have also gone high-tech in their unobtrusive measures. To trace customers’ paths through stores, they attach infrared surveillance devices to shopping carts. Grocery chains use these findings to place higher-profit items in more strategic locations (McCarthy 1993). Casino operators use chips that transmit radio frequencies, allowing them to track how much their high rollers are betting at every hand of poker or blackjack (Sanders 2005; Grossman 2007). Billboards read information embedded on a chip in your car key. As you drive by, the billboard displays **your** name with a personal message (Feder 2007). The same device can **collect** information as you drive by. Cameras in sidewalk billboards scan the facial features of people who pause to look at its advertising, reporting their sex, race, and how long they looked (Clifford 2008). The billboards, which raise ethical issues of invasion of privacy, are part of marketing, not sociological research.

It would be considered unethical to use most unobtrusive measures to research spouse abuse. You could, however, analyze 911 calls. Also, if there were a public forum held by abused or abusing spouses on the Internet, you could record and analyze the online conversations. Ethics in unobtrusive research are still a matter of dispute: To secretly record the behavior of people in public settings, such as a crowd, is generally considered acceptable, but to do so in private settings is not.

### Deciding Which Method to Use

How do sociologists choose among these methods? Four primary factors affect their decision. The first is **access to resources**. They may want to conduct a survey, for example, but if their finances won’t permit this, they might analyze documents instead. The second is **access to subjects**. Even though they prefer face-to-face interviews, if the people who make up the sample live far away, researchers might mail them questionnaires or conduct a survey by telephone or e-mail. The third factor concerns the **purpose of the research**. Each method is better for answering certain types of questions. Participant observation, for example, is good at uncovering people’s attitudes, while experiments are better at resolving questions of cause and effect. Fourth, the researcher’s **background or training** comes into play. In graduate school, sociologists study many methods, but they are able to practice only some of them. After graduate school, sociologists who were trained in quantitative research methods, which emphasize measurement and statistics, are likely to use surveys. Sociologists who were trained in qualitative research methods, which emphasize observing and interpreting people’s behavior, lean toward participant observation.
Controversy in Sociological Research

Sociologists sometimes find themselves in the hot seat because of their research. Some poke into private areas of life, which upsets people. Others investigate political matters, and their findings threaten those who have a stake in the situation. When researchers in Palestine asked refugees if they would be willing to accept compensation and not return to Israel if there were a peace settlement, most said they would take the buyout. When the head researcher released these findings, an enraged mob beat him and trashed his office (Bennet 2003). In the following Thinking Critically section, you can see how even such a straightforward task as counting the homeless can land sociologists in the midst of controversy.

Thinking CRITICALLY

Doing Controversial Research—Counting the Homeless

What could be less offensive than counting the homeless? As sometimes occurs, however, even basic research lands sociologists in the midst of controversy. This is what happened to sociologist Peter Rossi and his associates.

There was a dispute between advocates for the homeless and federal officials. The advocates claimed that 3 to 7 million Americans were homeless; the officials claimed that the total was about 250,000. Each side accused the other of gross distortion—the one to place pressure on Congress, the other to keep the public from knowing how bad the situation really was. But each side was only guessing.

Only an accurate count could clear up the picture. Peter Rossi and the National Opinion Research Center took on that job. They had no vested interest in supporting either side, only in answering this question honestly.

The challenge was immense. The population was evident—the U.S. homeless. A survey would be appropriate, but how do you survey a sample of the homeless? No one has a list of the homeless, and only some of the homeless stay at shelters. As for validity, to make certain that they were counting only people who were really homeless, the researchers needed a good operational definition of homelessness. To include people who weren’t really homeless would destroy the study’s reliability. The researchers wanted results that would be consistent if others were to replicate, or repeat, the study.

As an operational definition, the researchers used “literally homeless,” people “who do not have access to a conventional dwelling and who would be homeless by any conceivable definition of the term.” With funds limited, the researchers couldn’t do a national count, but they could count the homeless in Chicago.

By using a stratified random sample, the researchers were able to generalize to the entire city. How could they do this since there is no list of the homeless? They did have a list of the city’s shelters and a map of the city. A stratified random sample of the city’s shelters gave them access to the homeless who sleep in the shelters. For the homeless who sleep in the streets, parks, and vacant buildings, they used a stratified random sample of the city’s blocks.

Their findings? On an average night, 2,722 people are homeless in Chicago. Because people move in and out of homelessness, between 5,000 and 7,000 are homeless at
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...some point during the year. On warm nights, only two out of five sleep in the shelters, and even during Chicago’s cold winters only three out of four do so. Seventy-five percent are men, 60 percent African Americans. One in four is a former mental patient, one in five a former prisoner. Projecting these findings to the United States yields a national total of about 350,000 homeless people.

This total elated government officials and stunned the homeless advocates. The advocates said that the number couldn’t possibly be right, and they began to snipe at the researchers. This is one of the risks of doing research, for sociologists never know whose toes they will step on. The sniping made the researchers uncomfortable, and to let everyone know they weren’t trying to minimize the problem, they stressed that these 350,000 Americans live desperate lives. They sleep in city streets, live in shelters, eat out of garbage cans, and suffer from severe health problems.

The controversy continues. With funding at stake for shelters and for treating mental problems and substance abuse, homeless advocates continue to insist that at least 2 million Americans are homeless. While the total is not in the millions, it has doubled recently to 672,000. As a sign of changing times, veterans, many of them emotionally disturbed, make up 15 percent of this total.


Gender in Sociological Research

You know how significant gender is in your own life, how it affects your orientations and your attitudes. You also may be aware that gender opens and closes doors to you, a topic that we will explore in Chapter 11. Because gender is also a factor in social research, researchers must take steps to prevent it from biasing their findings. For example, sociologists Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla (1984, 2007) interviewed convicted rapists in prison. They were concerned that their gender might lead to interviewer bias—that the prisoners might shift their answers, sharing certain experiences or opinions with Marolla, but saying something else to Scully. To prevent gender bias, each researcher interviewed half the sample. Later in this chapter, we’ll look at what they found out.

Gender certainly can be an impediment in research. In our imagined research on spouse abuse, for example, could a man even do participant observation of women who have been beaten by their husbands? Technically, the answer is yes. But because the women have been victimized by men, they might be less likely to share their experiences and feelings with men. If so, women would be better suited to conduct this research, more likely to achieve valid results. The supposition that these victims will be more open with women than with men, however, is just that—a supposition. Research alone will verify or refute this assumption.

Gender is significant in other ways, too. It is certainly a mistake to assume that what applies to one sex also applies to the other (Bird and Rieker 1999; Neuman 2006). Women’s and men’s lives differ significantly, and if we do research on just half of humanity, our research will be vastly incomplete. Today’s huge numbers of women sociologists guarantee that women will not be ignored in social research. In the past, however, when almost all sociologists were men, women’s experiences were neglected.

Gender issues can pop up in unexpected ways in sociological research. I vividly recall this incident in San Francisco.

The streets were getting dark, and I was still looking for homeless people. When I saw someone lying down, curled up in a doorway, I approached the individual. As I got close, I began my opening research line, “Hi, I’m Dr. Henslin from...” The individual began to scream and started to thrash wildly. Startled by this sudden, high-pitched scream and by the rapid movements, I quickly backed away. When I later analyzed what had happened, I concluded that I had intruded into a woman’s bedroom.
This incident also holds another lesson. Researchers do their best, but they make mistakes. Sometimes these mistakes are minor, and even humorous. The woman sleeping in the doorway wasn’t frightened. It was only just getting dark, and there were many people on the street. She was just assertively marking her territory and letting me know in no uncertain terms that I was an intruder. If we make a mistake in research, we pick up and go on. As we do so, we take ethical considerations into account, which is the topic of our next section.

Ethics in Sociological Research

In addition to choosing an appropriate research method, we must also follow the ethics of sociology (American Sociological Association 1999). Research ethics require honesty, truth, and openness (sharing findings with the scientific community). Ethics clearly forbid the falsification of results. They also condemn plagiarism—that is, stealing someone else’s work. Another ethical guideline states that research subjects should generally be informed that they are being studied and should never be harmed by the research. Ethics also require that sociologists protect the anonymity of those who provide information. Sometimes people reveal things that are intimate, potentially embarrassing, or otherwise harmful to themselves. Finally, although not all sociologists agree, it generally is considered unethical for researchers to misrepresent themselves.

Sociologists take their ethical standards seriously. To illustrate the extent to which they will go to protect their respondents, consider the research conducted by Mario Brajuha.

Protecting the Subjects: The Brajuha Research

Mario Brajuha, a graduate student at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, was doing participant observation of restaurant workers. He lost his job as a waiter when the restaurant where he was working burned down—a fire of “suspicious origin,” as the police said. When detectives learned that Brajuha had taken field notes (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986), they asked to see them. Because he had promised to keep the information confidential, Brajuha refused to hand them over. When the district attorney subpoenaed the notes, Brajuha still refused. The district attorney then threatened to put Brajuha in jail. By this time, Brajuha’s notes had become rather famous, and unsavory characters—perhaps those who had set the fire—also wanted to know what was in them. They, too, demanded to see them, accompanying their demands with threats of a different nature. Brajuha found himself between a rock and a hard place.

For two years, Brajuha refused to hand over his notes, even though he grew anxious and had to appear at several court hearings. Finally, the district attorney dropped the subpoena. When the two men under investigation for setting the fire died, the threats to Brajuha, his wife, and their children ended.

Misleading the Subjects: The Humphreys Research

Sociologists agree on the necessity to protect respondents, and they applaud the professional manner in which Brajuha handled himself. Although it is considered acceptable for sociologists to do covert participant observation (studying some situation without announcing that they are doing research), to deliberately misrepresent oneself is considered unethical. Let’s look at the case of Laud Humphreys, whose research forced sociologists to rethink and refine their ethical stance.

Laud Humphreys, a classmate of mine at Washington University in St. Louis, was an Episcopal priest who decided to become a sociologist. For his Ph.D. dissertation, Humphreys (1971, 1975) studied social interaction in “tearooms,” public restrooms where some men go for quick, anonymous oral sex with other men.

Humphreys found that some restrooms in Forest Park, just across from our campus, were tearooms. He began a participant observation study by hanging around these restrooms. He found that in addition to the two men having sex, a third man—called a “watch queen”—served as a lookout for police and other unwelcome strangers.
Humphreys took on the role of watch queen, not only watching for strangers but also observing what the men did. He wrote field notes after the encounters.

Humphreys decided that he wanted to learn about the regular lives of these men. For example, what was the significance of the wedding rings that many of the men wore? He came up with an ingenious technique: Many of the men parked their cars near the tearooms, and Humphreys recorded their license plate numbers. A friend in the St. Louis police department gave Humphreys each man’s address. About a year later, Humphreys arranged for these men to be included in a medical survey conducted by some of the sociologists on our faculty.

Disguising himself with a different hairstyle and clothing, Humphreys visited the men’s homes. He interviewed the men, supposedly for the medical study. He found that they led conventional lives. They voted, mowed their lawns, and took their kids to Little League games. Many reported that their wives were not aroused sexually or were afraid of getting pregnant because their religion did not allow them to use birth control. Humphreys concluded that heterosexual men were also using the tearooms for a form of quick sex.

This study stirred controversy among sociologists and nonsociologists alike. Many sociologists criticized Humphreys, and a national columnist even wrote a scathing denunciation of “sociological snoopers” (Von Hoffman 1970). One of our professors even tried to get Humphreys' Ph.D. revoked. As the controversy heated up and a court case loomed, Humphreys feared that his list of respondents might be subpoenaed. He gave me the list to take from Missouri to Illinois, where I had begun teaching. When he called and asked me to destroy it, I burned the list in my backyard.

Was this research ethical? This question is not decided easily. Although many sociologists sided with Humphreys—and his book reporting the research won a highly acclaimed award—the criticisms continued. At first, Humphreys defended his position vigorously, but five years later, in a second edition of his book (1975), he stated that he should have identified himself as a researcher.

How Research and Theory Work Together

Research cannot stand alone. Nor can theory. As sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) argued so forcefully, research without theory is simply a collection of unrelated “facts.” But theory without research, Mills added, is abstract and empty—it can’t represent the way life really is.

Research and theory, then, are both essential for sociology. Every theory must be tested, which requires research. And as sociologists do research, they often come up with surprising findings. Those findings must be explained, and for that we need theory. As sociologists study social life, then, they combine research and theory.

The Real World: When the Ideal Meets the Real

Although we can list the ideals of research, real-life situations often force sociologists to settle for something that falls short of the ideal. In the following Thinking Critically section, let’s look at how two sociologists confronted the ideal and the real.
Thinking CRITICALLY

Are Rapists Sick? A Close-Up View of Research

Two sociologists, Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla, whose research was mentioned earlier, were not satisfied with the typical explanation that rapists are “sick,” psychologically disturbed, or different from other men. They developed the hypothesis that rape is like most human behavior—learned through interaction with others. That is, some men learn to think of rape as appropriate behavior.

To test this hypothesis, it would be best to interview a random sample of rapists. But this is impossible. There is no list of all rapists, so there is no way to give them all the same chance of being included in a sample. You can’t even use prison populations to select a random sample, for many rapists have never been caught, some who were caught were found not guilty, and some who were found guilty were given probation. And as we know from DNA testing, some who were convicted of rape are innocent. Consequently, Scully and Marolla confronted the classic dilemma of sociologists—either to not do the research or to do it under less than ideal conditions.

They chose to do the research. When they had the opportunity to interview convicted rapists in prison, they jumped at it. They knew that whatever they learned would be more than we already knew. They sent out 3,500 letters to men serving time in seven prisons in Virginia, the state where they were teaching. About 25 percent of the prisoners agreed to be interviewed. They matched these men on the basis of age, education, race–ethnicity, severity of offense, and previous criminal record. This resulted in a sample of 98 prisoners who were convicted of rape and a control sample of 75 men convicted of other offenses.

As noted earlier, because the sex of the interviewer can bias research results, Scully and Marolla each interviewed half the sample. It took them 600 hours to gather information on the prisoners, including their psychological, criminal, and sexual history. To guard against lies, they checked what the individuals told them against their institutional records. They used twelve scales to measure the men’s attitudes about women, rape, and themselves. In order to find out what circumstances the men defined as rape or when they viewed the victim as responsible, they also gave the men nine vignettes of forced sexual encounters and asked them to determine responsibility in each one.

Scully and Marolla discovered something that goes against common sense—that most rapists are not sick and that they are not overwhelmed by uncontrollable urges. The psychological histories of the rapists and the nonrapists were similar. These men rape for a variety of reasons: to “blow off steam” over problems they are having with others, to get sex, to feel powerful, and to hurt women (Monahan et al. 2005). Some rape spontaneously, while others plan their rapes. Some rape as a form of revenge, to get even with someone, not necessarily their victim. For some, rape is even a form of recreation, and they rape with friends on weekends.

Scully and Marolla also found support for what feminists had been pointing out for years, that power is a major element in rape. Here is what one man said:

Rape gave me the power to do what I wanted to do without feeling I had to please a partner or respond to a partner. I felt in control, dominant. Rape was the ability to have sex without caring about the woman’s response. I was totally dominant.

To discover that most rape is calculated behavior—that rapists are not “sick”; that a motivating force can be power, not passion; that the behavior stems from the criminal pursuit of pleasure, not from mental illness—is significant. It makes the sociological quest worthwhile.

In comparing their sample of rapists with their control group of nonrapists, Scully and Marolla also made another significant finding: The rapists are more likely to believe “rape myths.” They are more likely to believe that women cause their own rape by the way they act and the clothes they wear, that a woman who charges rape has simply changed her mind after participating in consensual sex, and that most men accused of rape are innocent.
What Is a Valid Sociological Topic?

Any human behavior is a valid sociological topic, even disreputable behavior. Spouse abuse is an example. Sociological research is based on the sociologist’s interests, access to subjects, appropriate methods, and ethical considerations. P. 126.

Common Sense and the Need for Sociological Research

Why isn’t common sense adequate?

Common sense doesn’t provide reliable information. When subjected to scientific research, commonsense ideas often are found to be limited or false. P. 126.

A Research Model

What are the eight basic steps of sociological research?

(1) Selecting a topic, (2) Defining the problem, (3) Reviewing the literature, (4) Formulating a hypothesis, (5) Choosing a research method, (6) Collecting the data, (7) Analyzing the results, and (8) Sharing the results. These steps are explained in detail on Pp. 126–128.

Connecting Research and Theory

Such findings go far beyond simply adding to our storehouse of “facts.” As indicated in Figure 5.1 on page 127, research stimulates both the development of theory and the need for more research. Scully and Marolla suggest that rape myths act as neutralizers, that they allow “potential rapists to turn off social prohibitions against injuring others.”

This hypothesis needs to be confirmed by other research. It also pinpoints the need to determine how such myths are transmitted. Which male subcultures perpetuate them? Do the mass media contribute to these myths? Do family, religion, and education create respect for females and help keep males from learning such myths? Or do they somehow contribute to these myths? If so, how?

Sociologists have begun to build on this path-breaking research, which was done, as usual, under less than ideal conditions. The resulting theorizing and research may provide the basis for making changes that reduce the incidence of rape in our society.


Sociology needs more of this type of research—imaginative and sometimes daring investigations conducted in an imperfect world under less than ideal conditions. This is really what sociology is all about. Sociologists study what people do—whether their behaviors are conforming or deviant, whether they please others or disgust them. No matter what behavior is studied, systematic research methods and the application of social theory take us beyond common sense. They allow us to penetrate surface realities so we can better understand human behavior—and, in the ideal case, make changes to help improve social life.
Gender in Sociological Research

What is the relationship between gender and research?

There are two aspects. First, findings based on samples of men do not necessarily apply to women and findings based on samples of women do not necessarily apply to men. Second, in some kinds of research, such as studying abused spouses, rape victims, and rapists, the gender of the researcher could affect findings. Pp. 140–141.

Ethics in Sociological Research

How important are ethics in sociological research?

Ethics are of fundamental concern to sociologists, who are committed to openness, honesty, truth, and protecting their subjects from harm. The Brajuha research on restaurant workers and the Humphreys research on “tearooms” were cited to illustrate ethical issues that concern sociologists. Pp. 141–142.

How Research and Theory Work Together

What is the relationship between theory and research?

Theory and research depend on one another. Theory generates questions that need to be answered by research, and sociologists use theory to interpret the data they gather. Research, in turn, helps to generate theory: Findings that don’t match what is expected can indicate a need to modify theory. Pp. 142–144.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT Chapter 5

1. Should sociologists be allowed to do research on disreputable or disapproved behavior? On illegal behavior? Why or why not?

2. What factors make for bad sociological research? How can these be avoided?

3. What ethics govern sociological research?

4. Is it right (or ethical) for sociologists to not identify themselves when they do research? To misrepresent themselves? What if identifying themselves as researchers will destroy their access to a research setting or to informants?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

What can you find in MySocLab? www.mysoclab.com

• Complete Ebook
• Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities
• Mapping and Data Analysis exercises
• Sociology in the News
• Classic Readings in Sociology
• Research and Writing advice

Where Can I Read More on This Topic?

Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.