

Introduction to Sociological Research

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to the major topics within sociological research. You will become familiar with the process used to conduct research and the principles that guide researchers' choices when they design and conduct a study. You'll also use your knowledge of sociology to build your problem solving skills. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Introduction to Sociological Research

Welcome to the exciting world of sociological research. Sociologists study society and human behavior, and their research produces insightful and valuable results. In their research, sociologists go beyond common sense understandings in order to explain or interpret social phenomena. When sociologists are on the job, they do not see the world as we normally do; instead, they question and analyze why things happen and ask if there is a way to stop a problem before it emerges. There are many different methods, tools, and approaches that a sociologist might use to do so, as you'll see in the following scenario.

IN CONTEXT

Dr. Geoff Pearson studies football hooliganism, the phenomenon of rowdy and occasionally violent soccer fandom that's prevalent in the UK where he is based. But in doing his doctoral research into the topic, he found that it was difficult to get an accurate impression of the behavior of these football fans just by asking them about it. "Often non-violent fans would exaggerate their involvement in disorder whilst serious 'hooligans' tended to 'play-down' their involvement for fear of being reported," he explained to an interviewer later.

Since interviews were unreliable, Dr. Pearson decided to embark on covert research in order to make sufficient direct observations about the fans' behavior. This meant that Dr. Pearson had to pretend to be one of the hooligans himself, embedding himself in a community of Blackpool Football Club fans and gaining their trust so that they would behave around him as though he were a peer.

As a result, he was pressured by members of the fan community to commit criminal acts, such as storming the playing field and harassing rival supporters. Dr. Pearson felt it was necessary to commit these minor crimes to gain the acceptance of the group he was studying and continue his research.

"My justification for this action at the time was that it enhanced my position in the field and I was

accepted for the remainder of the season as one of the ‘hardcore’ despite my continual ‘opting out’ of more serious offences,” Dr. Pearson later said.

“In fact, towards the end of this research period, I was informed by one of the research subjects that I was considered to be ‘a bit of a nutter’ by some of the group. This was despite the fact that during my entire time in the field, I had not ‘connected’ with a single punch nor been arrested, in contrast to many of the research subjects.”

The excerpt from the interview above illustrates just one way sociologists study social groups and human behavior. Participant observation, like that conducted by Dr. Pearson, is one type of sociology research method, but we will learn about several other ways in which sociologists conduct research—and not all of them include risking arrest!



Problem Solving: Skill in Action

Sociological research is used to solve several problems in our world. It is used to explore observations and answer questions about society, such as which social factors influence the choice of romantic partners or to what extent gender affects economic mobility. This data is then used to both identify societal problems and the most effective steps we can take to solve them.



THINK ABOUT IT

How else might a sociologist study football hooligans, if they are concerned that asking questions directly will get unreliable results?

While some results of sociological studies might seem like common sense, sociologists rely on systematic scientific processes to collect data and evaluate social behavior. Whereas “common sense” can be based on myths, traditions, subjective opinion, or amateur observations, social scientists carefully examine and investigate in order to draw accurate conclusions about society as a whole.

The primary aim in this unit is to illustrate how sociologists utilize sociological research methods to understand human behavior, groups, and other aspects of society. Through examples, you will see the difference between common sense understandings and sociological research in trying to explain or understand social phenomena.

Some sociological research centers around groups, as described in the opening vignette, while other sociological research might detail the experiences of specific families or those of individuals.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A sociologist may study individuals or families who are facing eviction or who have been evicted from their homes, or they may examine societal conditions that have resulted in increased evictions in the United States.

Sociologists question and analyze why things happen, always considering larger social, political, and economic forces.

2. Quantitative Research

Because sociology examines social relationships and behavior (things everyone is familiar with in some way), sometimes the concepts you cover in this course will seem like common sense. Yet one of the aspects of sociology that makes it an exciting discipline is that it strives to utilize scientific principles to check our common sense and our biases, and to critically examine perceived relationships and meanings. Another term for quantitative is **positivism**. The positivist movement, tied to French philosopher Auguste Comte, popularized the idea that anything that was real could be counted and analyzed, including social phenomena.

We often have opinions about social situations, but these may be biased by our expectations or based on limited data. Instead, scientific research is based on **quantifiable evidence**, which is evidence that can be measured or expressed as a numerical value. This type of evidence only comes from scientifically gathered data or from experimentation. Conducting research and testing a hypothesis in a controlled setting through deductive methods is the typical process for obtaining quantifiable evidence.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Many people believe that crime rates go up when there is a full moon. However, research does not support this belief. Psychologists Rotton and Kelly (1985) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the full moon's effects on behavior. **Meta-analysis** is a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together. Rotton and Kelly's meta-analysis included thirty-seven prior studies on the effects of the full moon on crime rates, and the overall findings were that full moons are entirely unrelated to crime, suicide, psychiatric problems, and crisis center calls. We may each know of an instance in which a crime happened during a full moon, but it was likely just a coincidence.



TERMS TO KNOW

Quantitative Research

A research method that focuses on gathering data from experiments or studies.

Positivism

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Quantifiable Evidence

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Meta-Analysis

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3. Qualitative Research

While empirical evidence is very useful, sociologists have found that some social phenomena cannot be easily studied using traditionally scientific approaches. Sometimes it is necessary to utilize what are called **qualitative research** methods, which focus on gathering information instead of designing a study. While systematic, this approach doesn't follow the scientific method in its research design. Instead, an interpretive framework seeks to understand social worlds from the point of view of participants. They use their initial observations as a means to form research questions. Sociologists will use a variety of methodologies throughout the course of this research to gain in-depth knowledge.

Qualitative research is generally more descriptive or narrative in its findings. Rather than formulating a

hypothesis and applying a method for testing it, a qualitative researcher will develop approaches for exploring the topic at hand that may involve a significant amount of direct observation or interaction with subjects. This type of researcher also learns as they proceed, and sometimes they adjust the research methods or processes midway to optimize findings as they evolve.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Let's say you want to determine how much immigrants assimilate to a new country. Quantitative research might let you determine how much local food they are eating, their occupational and educational attainment in the new country, and other outward measures of assimilation. But in order to see if they are truly assimilating or just adapting based on the availability of local resources will require a qualitative approach that includes research methodologies like participant observation, open ended interviews and possibly surveys created after much observation. After building trust with individuals or a community, a researcher could use these tools to obtain an unscientific but much richer and more detailed understanding how a specific group has assimilated.



WATCH

All sociological studies begin with one simple question: why? In the following Sophia Story video, you'll see how Dr. Tamara Mose made incredible and important discoveries by following her curiosity about a pattern she was noticing in her Brooklyn neighborhood. With a little investigation and reliance on her problem solving skill, she exposed important issues facing an often overlooked group of employees—nannies—and set the stage for positive change.



TERM TO KNOW

Qualitative Research

A research method that focuses on gathering information in a narrative format instead of designing a study.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you received an **introduction to sociological research**, and the major categories of inquiry it includes. You saw that **quantitative research** involves gathering countable data through experiments or studies, while **qualitative research** focuses on gathering more detailed information in a narrative format.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES Geoff Pearson (2009) *The researcher as hooligan: where 'participant' observation means breaking the law*, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 12:3, 243-255, DOI: 10.1080/13645570701804250



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