CHAPTER 3 HOW SOCIOLOGISTS DO RESEARCH

It seems that all scientists do research. Well, sociologist are no different. To them, almost any topic dealing with human behavior is a valid area to be researched. It doesn’t matter if the behavior is unusual or ordinary, very poor or very good, spontaneous or uninhibited, natural or
coerced; it is subject to study.

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## Send to the Discussion Forum five topics you think would make valid studies for a sociologist and tell why you think a sociologist would be interested in them. ##

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We talked about common sense and the need for sociological research in, but I want us to discuss it a little further. Quite often we have heard or have said. Why is that? Just common sense. Common sense has helped a lot of us through various situations in our lives, but it really can’t be relied on as a source of knowledge because it’s quite limited (How much common sense does one have?) and what we feel is correct often is not. What may seem right for you or is considered as common sense to you may not be for me.

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## Send to the Discussion Forum five things you think are common sense concepts, e.g., common sense tells us it’s foolish to cross the street when the light is green. ##

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When sociologists do research, they work from a model which has eight Basic Steps. ***First*** they choose a topic that generally will have the following criteria for doing the study.

Curiosity: Why do certain behaviors lead to certain outcomes? Why is it that two children raised by the same methods (it doesn’t matter if they are from upper or lower income families) turn out differently? One reaches their potential, the other doesn’t.

Interest: A particularly interesting topic surfaces and sparks interest in the researcher.

Funding: Often, grants from Federal, state, and local governments become available to study certain topics, e.g., what has made society so conducive to the formation of gangs?

Social Issues: Social issues of global to local significance attract sociologists? attention. Things like drug cultures, unemployment, gangs, urban blight, etc.

***Second,*** once the problem is identified, it must be defined. Then they will ask, ?What do we want to learn and why??

***Third,*** they will take a look at any existing data or literature that is
available. What have previous studies (if any) shown? What methods of study were used? When and where was the data collected? (Time, year, etc.)

***Fourth,*** they will develop a hypothesis. What are the expected relationships between all of the variables according to what our theory predicts? Are they congruent or are there differences. If so why? (The hypothesis needs
to have operational definitives, i.e. If this happens, a particular event, emotion, etc. then we can expect this result by this time.) It is very important that precise ways are used in measuring hypotheses.

***Fifth,*** the choice of a research method is critical. Some methods will not work as well or at all when you are collecting data. Surveys, questionnaires, etc., all have to be specifically written and administered to obtain scientific results. The way questions are asked can skew the data. You cannot load the dice.

***Sixth,*** validity and reliability are two issues of utmost importance when collecting data. You must have a method that will produce the results it was designed for (Validity) and the results are consistent throughout the sample (Reliability).

***Seventh*** is analyzing the data. Several methods can be used singly or in combination with other methods to analyze the data. Testing for correlations, doing statistical analysis, analyzing content, etc., are all used. The advent of the computer has helped to compress the amount of time it takes to get the results. Often predictions can be made quite accurately with data as soon as it starts coming in, for example, election results.

***Eighth*** is the sharing of results, e.g., presentations at seminars and conferences. Articles published in journals and scientific magazines and lectures in university classes are all ways of getting results to the public and others interested. Other sociologists may want to duplicate a specific study (called Replication) and compare the results to see if they continue to be reliable.

I suppose we would be remiss if we did not have some discussion on research
methods. There are six research methods that sociologists use. They are:

Surveys
Participant observation (participates and observes in the study at the same time)
Secondary analysis (analyzing data that others have collected a second time)
Documents (analyzing books, police reports, newspapers, etc.)
Unobtrusive research (observing people who do not know they are being studied)
Experiments

Surveys ask a series of questions. A representative sample of the targeted population is made by one of two methods.

Random Sample: Everyone in the targeted population has an equal chance of being selected to take the survey.

Stratified Random Sample: Different levels are identified, such as low - high incomes; 10 - 12 graders; junior high students; senior high students; 40 - 50 year olds; random numbers are used to choose the sample.

In a survey, you need to make sure your questions are neutral, i.e., those who answer them (Respondents) are able to express their own ideas. Usually a survey is given as a self-administered questionnaire or at times an interview is used. A problem with an interview is that sometimes the interviewer tends to make interviewees give biased answers. What happens is the person being interviewed may not want to respond directly to a person but
would answer the question as if he/she were doing the survey by him/herself.

There are advantages (cost, larger number can be done) (self-administered) and disadvantages to both methods (higher cost, lower number can be done) (interview). So what the researcher has to do is determine which method will produce the best results and go with it.

Participant Observation is another technique used which allows the researcher to participate in the group, activity, live in the neighborhood, etc. It is very important the researchers personal characteristics blend in with the group(s) being studied. Credibility is essential. We know it would be hard for a person of a different race to be able to move into a neighborhood that is ethnically not his/her own and be accepted without some wondering what the heck is going on. An example: When working for a university, we decided in our department (Counseling and Guidance) we would provide free counseling in the wards to enable people to acquire skills needed to help them obtain a job. We set up a Mini-Station in the wards and sat there for three to four days with only one or two people coming in.

We analyzed our situation. Here we were, all dressed up, shirts, ties, suits, polished shoes. You know the professional look because we were representing the university. But where we were the people had on jeans, tennis shoes, tee-shirts, shorts, etc. The next day everyone dressed down.
I don’t have to tell you what happened. I know you can figure it out. We were busy. You need to make people feel they are on par with you in certain ways. So, age, race, weight (yes, even weight), religion, gender, etc., are all important in establishing rapport and make a difference in the success of a Participant Observation Study.

Secondly, Analysis and Document research have been described above. Suffice it to say, both have important parts in a sociologist?s tools for conducting a study.

Probably Unobtrusive Research may be hardest to do and perhaps could cause some problems. Legal ramifications, invasion of privacy, etc., might be some causes of concern to a researcher. High-tech equipment used to track people and watch from out-of-view are two of the methods used to collect data and analyze it to validate the hypothesis.

Experiments are use to find cause and effect relationships. An experiment is developed to test a hypothesis. Usually there is a control group and an experimental group so the researchers can compare the data.

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## ASSIGNMENT ##
Choose one and discuss.  This is due by 11:59 on Wednesday.  Usual length.

Discussion Questions
1. Should there be limitations on who has access to the research findings of sociologists? If so, why?  If not, why not?

2. Why do you think that sociologists, might choose to work under less that ideal conditions, like going into prisons to work with rapists or hanging out with drug addicts to understand why they do what they do even though it could put them in some kind of danger?