

Asking Questions

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will take a closer look at the first step of the scientific method for sociology. We will discuss how sociologists formulate research questions, and what major principles and concerns are involved in asking sociological questions. We'll also dive further into the connection between sociological research and problem solving. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Asking Questions

The first step of the scientific method is to ask a question, describe a problem, and identify the specific area of interest. The topic should be narrow enough to study within a geography and time frame. “Are societies capable of sustained happiness?” would be too vague. “Are married people happier than single people?” “Are people with children happier than people without children?” These questions are more specific, but how is happiness defined and measured?

The question should also be broad enough to have universal merit. “What do personal hygiene habits reveal about the values of college freshmen at XYZ College?” would be too narrow to be useful, so we might want to broaden it to a particular age group (i.e. 4-year college students ages 18-22). Also, if you sensed some implicit bias in this question, you would be correct to question whether hygiene, a series of behaviors, should be studied as behaviors or as values (beliefs).

That said, happiness and hygiene are worthy topics to study but must be framed as research questions. As you can probably see, this is a difficult process even for veteran sociologists. Sociologists are careful to define their terms. When forming these basic research questions, sociologists develop **operational definitions**: they define concepts in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it.

↪ **EXAMPLE** If a study is looking at the impacts of obesity on education outcomes, the researchers will need an operational definition of obesity. They might say that they are using the CDC's definition, or they might base it on BMI, or use a measurement provided by a doctor they are collaborating with, or some other measure. It doesn't really matter what measurement of obesity they are using, as long as it is clearly defined for experimental purposes.

The operational definition identifies an observable condition of the concept and the means by which to measure it. By creating operational definitions, researchers can collect data methodically in a way that supports the overarching goals of validity and reliability in sociological research.

↪ **EXAMPLE** In a hygiene study, hygiene could be defined as “personal habits to maintain physical appearance,” but that might be difficult to measure. Would brushing one's teeth be considered

physical appearance (i.e. white teeth) or health (i.e. healthy gums, prevent tooth decay, etc.)? To operationalize hygiene, one must be clear about what constitutes personal hygiene for appearance. A researcher could develop a checklist, for example, of things that are included.

Many times, a research question changes. Perhaps after thinking about hygiene and values, the question changes to “How do differing personal hygiene habits reflect cultural gender role norms?” Thus, the ways in which culture shapes something very personal would be the topic of this study. Should a woman shave her legs? Should a man shave his legs? Who should have facial hair, and what kinds? Do these questions change depending on if we are talking about children, young adults, or older adults?

When sociologists ask questions about the world, no topic is off limits. Every aspect of human behavior is a source of possible investigation. Sociologists question the world that humans have created and live in. They notice patterns of behavior as people move through that world. Using sociological methods and systematic research within the framework of the scientific method and a scholarly interpretive perspective, sociologists have discovered workplace patterns that have transformed industries, family patterns that have led to legislative changes, and education patterns that have aided structural changes in classrooms. Studying patterns of human behavior provides insight into problems and provides the data needed to make decisions that address these problems, all while improving **problem solving skills**.

Sociological research attempts to answer a vast array of questions, such as these and more, about our social world. Sociologists use data and/or qualitative research to increase their understanding of societies and social interactions, but in all cases research begins with the pursuit of an answer to a question. Paradoxically, the most interesting research findings often lead to more research!



BRAINSTORM

Sociology is a broad discipline covering many topics. Think about something that interests you or relates to your experience or your life. Right now you are studying sociology in an online course. There are many aspects of being a student in an online course that you might find interesting to study. Perhaps you would be interested in how the student experience is similar to or different from the traditional 4-year college, or how the online course is experienced by students who have attended traditional colleges and those who have not. You might look into how relationships and communities are built among students who aren't studying together in a classroom. Or you might be interested in how a student's age, class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other characteristic relates to how they experience taking an online course.

Think about other aspects of your student experience that interest you. How might you formulate them into research questions?



TERM TO KNOW

Operational Definition

A definition of a concept that defines it in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it.

2. Value-Relevant Research

How does the process of sociological knowledge-making occur? How do we evolve from broad questions and interest to actual codified sociological knowledge?

We can begin to answer these questions by looking at two elements of social research that were first

identified by German sociologist Max Weber in his famous essay “Objectivity in the Social Sciences:” value-relevant research and value-free research.

Value-relevant research is a recognition that your values guide you to your research topics. If you're concerned about economic equality in the United States, you might be interested in how wealth and success transfers from generation to generation. This is an example of how your values orient you in the direction of what you want to study. You're not likely to devote much time to studying something that you don't consider to be valuable or interesting. Weber recognized this tendency in research.



TERM TO KNOW

Value-Relevant Research (Max Weber)

An acknowledgment that our values guide us to our research topics; we study what we find valuable and interesting.

3. Value-Free Research

However, you can't simply let your values cloud and bias your research, a notion that ties to the concept of **value-free research**. Value-free research doesn't mean research that is contrary to one's values. It means that research should be objective, and not biased by the researcher's values, principles, or beliefs, even if those things may have led the researcher to their topic in the first place. Sociologists try hard to prevent the values that originally guided them to their research topics to bias the research itself.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A researcher's concern for unhoused people in her city led her to study the importance of available shelter beds for this community. This was value-relevant research. She hoped to find that the shelters were overcrowded and that the people she interviewed who were sleeping on the streets would be eager to move into a shelter if space were available. But instead, the researcher discovered that there were actually sufficient shelter beds available, but some unhoused people refused the shelters because they felt unsafe there, or because there were rules and curfews that they didn't want to follow.

If the researcher were to persist in focusing on her anticipated overcrowding issue, instead of listening to the actual preferences of the community she was studying, that would be an instance of bias. But if she shifted her focus to learn more about the safety concerns and abundance of rules that were keeping unhoused people out of shelters, that would be objective, value-free research.



TERM TO KNOW

Value-Free Research (Max Weber)

Research must be objective and should not be biased by our values, principles, or beliefs.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you dove into the first step of the scientific method, **asking questions**. You saw the concerns involved in properly formulating a research question, such as Weber's ideas of **value-relevant research**, which is an acknowledgement that our values guide us to our chosen research topics, and **value-free research**, which is the demand that research be objective.

Best of luck in your learning!

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