

# Choosing a Topic



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discover how social scientists go about choosing a topic to study.
- Be able to identify a sociological problem.
- Prepare for the discussion in which a topic of study will be selected by the class.

The first step in conducting a scientific study is to select a topic you would like to investigate. Your instructor will dedicate some class time for you and your fellow students to list possible topics for your research and agree together on one hypothesis that you will investigate as a class. The purpose of this chapter is to help prepare you for that discussion. First, we review how social scientists come to identify topics that they eventually do research on. Next, we help you think through some issues that will help your class choose a topic appropriate for this particular exercise.

## HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS CHOOSE A TOPIC TO STUDY

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Have you ever considered entering a vocation that involves discovering things people don't know? Many people who conduct research today do so, in part, because it is an essential part of their jobs. Social scientists who engage in research are often professors in colleges and universities around the world. For them, conducting research is a benefit of the job because a passion for the joy of discovery is what led many into their vocations in the first place. In some large research universities, one's ability to do quality research is even more important than the ability to teach. The ability to conduct research is, for many professors, the most important component by which they are evaluated.

Your own professor likely has job requirements that include conducting research and publishing the results. These expectations differ with the educational institution. Instructors in community colleges or technical institutes typically have a heavy teaching load and few requirements to conduct regular research. The same is true for part-time or adjunct faculty at large universities. They are hired primarily to teach. If adjunct faculty hope to get permanent positions as professors (rather than being hired year-to-year, often for low pay), they need to find time to do research and publish, in addition to spending many hours every week in the front of the classroom.

Faculty at private colleges are also rewarded by conducting research, though the expectations are usually somewhat less than for faculty in large public universities. This is because

a primary mission of most private colleges is quality teaching. Still, few faculty get tenured without a reasonable record of publication. Articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals are still those that garner the greatest respect in science-based disciplines. Virtually all professors in the social sciences are expected to do research as a requirement of the job.

Other professionals paid to conduct research are people with a graduate degree (that is, a master's or Ph.D.) who are hired by government or research firms to investigate certain phenomena. Ph.D. graduates can secure a postdoctorate, a one- or two-year university position that involves doing research. For these and many other positions, conducting research and publishing the results are integral parts of the job. They do little or no teaching so they can focus almost exclusively on their research. Imagine what an opportunity it is to work full-time making new discoveries.

For professionals with a full-time research job, the topic they investigate is often predetermined by the company or expert they work for, the government department in which they are employed, or the client they are serving. Professionals employed at major polling firms, for example, typically enjoy a large salary and perquisites, not to mention many excellent resources to help collect good-quality data. For some, though, disadvantages of the job are having someone else dictate the research topic and having little time to more fully explore interesting relationships and patterns in the data than what was asked for by the client.

## PURSuing YOUR OWN INTERESTS

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A major joy of being a professor is that the selection of a research topic is often determined by one's *own* interests and passions. Think about it! What would you like to find out more about in life? What do you feel passionate about? Good-quality information is often a critical part of solving any social problem. If you want to reduce crime, for example, you first need to know what the crime rate is, what motivates people to engage in criminal activity, and whether or not there are patterns to certain types of crime. You'll also want to know whether any attempts to solve social problems are effective, or whether they're just wasting people's time and money. Collecting good-quality information on a topic about which you are passionately interested is one of the most rewarding aspects of a professor's job.

I'll share a personal example to illustrate. Growing up in the 1970s, I was keenly aware of controversy surrounding heavy metal music, which many deemed harmful or even evil. Many of my friends, though, closely identified with the music. For my master's thesis, I chose to conduct a qualitative investigation into the heavy metal subculture. At the time, heavy metal music was seen as the most deviant style of music around. I spent a year in the

scene, with people who consumed and produced the music. I analyzed the lyrics of almost three hundred heavy metal songs. I even played in a hard rock band as a drummer for a few months to get a feel for what it's like to create the music.

Through this experience, I found that the values promulgated in the subculture weren't all that different from those of mainstream society, and especially other leisure-based subcultures. The symbols used to express these values, however, were different. For example, to express male dominance and aggression, male "headbangers" might wear a studded leather wristband or a leather dog collar around the neck, complete with eight-inch spikes. Mainstream society's negative reaction toward such symbols created most of the anger and animosity directed at those involved in the subculture (Friesen, 1990; Friesen and Epstein, 1994).

I concluded the study by suggesting that there exists a reciprocal relationship between society and subcultures labeled as deviant. Society benefits from this situation; for example, creators of and listeners to heavy metal music become identifiable groups that are easy to label as deviant, reinforcing the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior and increasing the feeling of moral solidarity and superiority on the part of "normals." In return, heavy metal creators and listeners (overwhelmingly adolescent at the time) achieved a certain amount of power through fear. Others in society usually avoided eye contact or physical proximity in the streets and malls where headbangers would congregate. This type of personal power felt good to young people who were otherwise controlled by parents, schools, and societal constraints that restricted their freedom of movement, and even their voting and driving privileges.

It should be obvious that the selection of my research topic was something both deeply personal and intellectually interesting. I wanted to know what the heavy metal phenomenon was really all about. It was satisfying to thoroughly research the topic and come to an understanding of the phenomena in a way that made sense, both to me and to the broader academic community. Somewhat surprisingly, most of the heavy metal listeners I spoke with were also very pleased with my finished product. They felt that my research helped their voices be heard and added some reason and legitimacy to their activities. Giving otherwise disenfranchised people a voice is, incidentally, one of the goals of qualitative research (Ragin, 1994).

It should be noted that governments (federal, state, municipal) influence the research process by making research money (called "grants") available for people who investigate a subject about which government officials want more information. Government agencies advertise a grant competition and take applications from individuals or firms who design a study and offer to conduct the research. Over time, the various actors in this process compile a body of documented research literature on a specific topic, and what we know about a particular topic grows thereby. Most researchers end up specializing in a particular area of research and become well acquainted with other experts in the field and what questions remain unanswered through science.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER AS YOUR CLASS CHOOSES A TOPIC

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For the class project outlined in this book, your class has the luxury of choosing a topic in which everyone is potentially interested! This is your chance to think big. What questions about human behavior would you like to answer? Is there a topic about which you feel passionate, or curious? Perhaps you've recently engaged in an argument of sorts with friends or loved ones. What was the topic? Is it possible to gather information that would help resolve the dispute?

If you review the table of contents in a typical Introduction to Sociology textbook, you'll get an idea of what kinds of topics sociologists study. Those topics fit the aims of this particular course. The discussion at the end of this chapter helps ensure that the topic selected will be sociologically relevant and researchable in the context of your class.

### THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

The topic you choose to research for this class will obviously be one that is *sociologically* interesting. This can be tricky. To choose such a topic, you first need to think like a sociologist. You don't necessarily have to choose sociology as a career or even a major, but getting practice in thinking sociologically exposes you to possible explanations of human behavior that you may not have thought of before. If you can think sociologically, it will make you more of an asset in almost any chosen profession, because you'll be able to add new perspectives when trying to solve problems.

In truth, thinking sociologically is something you already do. Do you hold opinions, for example, that attitudes or actions differ among groups according to age, or sex, or culture? Do you believe that children who are spanked will generally grow up to be different people from those who are not spanked? Perhaps you have an attitude on the impact of growing up in a wealthy home, compared to a middle-class or even an impoverished one. Human beings regularly form opinions on the impact that shared social experiences have on behaviors or beliefs. That's thinking sociologically.

Let me illustrate with a hypothetical example from the workplace. Let's say you've noticed that workers in your glass-blowing company are overly nervous and anxious at work. Work is interrupted or slowed down as a result, because the workers have to take time to manage their anxiety or cool down. If you poll most of the foremen and managers in the plant, they might suggest bringing in an expert who can teach the workers stress management techniques. This individual focus would have workers taken out of their work stations for a time to be trained in how to breathe or meditate, in an effort to keep their anxiety at a level that doesn't negatively affect their productivity.

With sociological training, one of the first things to focus on is the social environment in which these people are working. What rules govern how they work? Rules are part of the social environment because they are constructed by social actors to structure activity in a given situation. In this situation, you learn that the workers are expected to work ten hours a day, produce a large number of glass products, and have no breakage. If they do break an item, management insists on deducting the cost of the item from the pay of the worker responsible.

Thinking sociologically, might you suggest solutions to the employee stress problem other than stress management workshops? Can you think of things in the social environment that might be causing a higher stress level for the workers? A sociologist would likely recommend revising the rules of the workplace, such as decreeing shorter work days or longer breaks during the day. Changing the rules about who pays for broken glass would also decrease worker stress because they would not be as worried about breaking and paying for the products they are creating. Permitting a few broken items per week might reduce the stress level among the workers and increase their productivity.

The important point to take from this example is that the problem of productivity may not be something intrinsic to the employees. Employees are indeed experiencing stress, but not because of who they are. The problem is a consequence of their work environment; stress is experienced because the environment includes a variety of factors that induce stress. Understanding the influence of the social environment on the individual is part of the sociological perspective.

### Social Problems and Sociological Problems

If you don't have much practice in thinking sociologically, you might first think of a topic that is considered by most to be a **social problem**. A social problem is something about society that we would like to change, something that causes people problems but whose roots are based in social, rather than individual, conditions. Poverty, for example, is something most people consider to be a social problem. Most members of society would like to see poverty completely eliminated, though people disagree as to how to go about it. Homelessness (a related problem) becomes a social problem if we as a society ask, "What can we do to eliminate homelessness in the United States?"

Can you think of other social problems that you could conduct research on in your class? Social problems are such that their causes or solutions are social in nature. Raising the legal minimum wage would have the effect of reducing the number of people living in poverty. Thus poverty is a social problem in that it can be reduced by changing the laws or rules of society. Racism, sexism, violence, terrorism, war, and the effects of social stratification are examples of other social problems addressed by sociologists.

As you think sociologically, you might think of a topic that is sociologically interesting but not exactly defined as a social problem. We call this group of topics **sociological problems**. All social problems are sociological problems, but not all sociological problems are social problems. For example, have you ever wondered what kinds of things influenced

other students in your class to choose to attend your particular college or university? Was it conveniently located? Was it the lower tuition cost compared to other institutions? Perhaps it was the reputation of the school or of a particular program. Is your reason for attending this school similar to or different from those of your classmates?

This is a question that is sociologically interesting. That is, there are likely shared reasons students chose your particular school. We wouldn't call these reasons, or the decision to attend the school, a social "problem." Quite the opposite; we value people's decision to further their education. The question as to whether there are common reasons for people to choose a particular college or university is thus sociologically interesting. Answering this question is a sociological problem in that it is theoretically interesting to attempt to answer it. It is not a social problem in that it is not something we necessarily want to change.

### Beliefs and Behavior

Whether you're formulating research questions that are sociological problems or social problems, thinking sociologically involves first considering social influences. Social influences are forces that exist *outside* of an individual that lead to changes in the individual. **Beliefs** are one *type* of social influence or social reality. Beliefs are attitudes held by individuals, but they can be social in being shared by others and reinforced through social interaction. It is generally the case that members of religious organizations hold common beliefs. Children raised in these organizations are taught the beliefs through a process known as *socialization*. Adults who decide to join these organizations are likewise taught the beliefs of the group, often in formal classes but sometimes in informal conversation or through sermons or other public lectures (also known as secondary socialization). These children or adult converts eventually *internalize* the beliefs of the organization; that is, they come to believe them for themselves. But where did the belief originate? It first existed in the social group that the individual joined. Thus shared beliefs are a component of the culture of a group.

Beliefs that are shared by many can be a major influence on behavior. People hold common attitudes or beliefs about almost everything in our everyday world: what people should wear, and how they should talk, walk, or even think. People hold attitudes regarding who should be president, or what should be done so that there is less poverty. People usually believe that one kind of family form is better than others, and they form beliefs dictating their positions regarding homosexuality (or heterosexuality) as a choice or innate disposition. Understanding what people believe is of interest to sociologists. Are there any beliefs, particularly those held by college students, that you would like to investigate? Perhaps you would like to choose one belief to study as a topic.

A second social facet that can be measured through social research is actions or **behavior**. That is, groups of people hold certain beliefs in common, but they may also exhibit similar behaviors. People acting in concert can wield great power. They can do great harm to others by way of violence, lynching, murder, or beatings. They can also give aid to others by helping them in times of trouble. Thousands of volunteers helped to clean up the

devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Frequently attending church services or movie theatres would be other examples of behavior.

Are there specific behaviors you might like to focus on as the topic of your class study? In particular, do students engage in behaviors you would like to investigate? The amount of time spent studying, perhaps? how often people attend class? how many hours students spend at work outside of class? All of these are examples of researchable behavior.

## ENSURING THE RESEARCHABILITY OF YOUR TOPIC

While you're deciding on the topic you would like to investigate at your college or university, it is important to note that some topics, though perfectly legitimate and sociologically interesting for other studies, are not appropriate for the purposes of this class exercise. In most studies, the topic selected determines the kinds of people from whom information should be collected. Not so for this project. Because the investigation is limited to using students who attend your school, a topic of relevance to this group needs to be chosen.

### Collecting Information from Students

The decision to gather data only from your fellow students is made for several reasons. First, they are easily accessible to you. Trying to interview, say, a random sample of people in your town or city would require considerable resources and time in compiling a list of everyone who lives in the city, drawing a random sample, and then taking the time to contact these people (by phone or in person) and interviewing them. Second, applications for research projects carried out on human subjects at universities and colleges in the United States must first be submitted and approved by a human subjects review board at that institution. This too is time-consuming and effort-intensive. At many institutions this step can be avoided if (1) the research is for pedagogical or training purposes, (2) the data will not be published, and (3) the director or professor leading the research project uses common sense and does not design the project in such a way that would potentially harm or embarrass the people who take part in the project. (Your instructor will complete this review board application for the class if it is required at your institution.)

Your project will meet these criteria as long as it avoids questions that are overly revealing, embarrassing, or potentially harmful. Asking someone the number of sexual partners he or she has ever had, for example, or about involvement in illegal activities such as drug and alcohol use would be inappropriate. Asking about *attitudes* toward premarital sex or drug or alcohol use, however, may be acceptable for the project, depending on how the question is worded.

### Ensuring Variation

Finally, the topic chosen for your class project must ensure that there is sufficient **variation** at your school to secure a variety of responses for each question asked during the interviews. Variation is important in social research because making comparisons is a crucial



part of any science. For example, if your class chose to study the relationship of sex to drinking behavior but interviewed only males, no appraisal could be made of the drinking behavior of males *compared to* females. Variation is needed in every question that will eventually be included in the analysis.

Because of this, it is important to select a topic in which one can anticipate a variety of responses from the people from whom information will be collected. Let's say you are interested in studying the effects of a college education on voting behavior, for example. This would be an inappropriate topic for the purposes of our study. Why? If we were to use college education as a topic of study at your school, you would collect information only from people who are college-educated (or in the process of becoming so). Who would they be compared with? It would be essential to collect information from people who have not gone to college, but this is beyond the scope of our project; we already know that we will gather information only from people at your school.

Thus the topic you choose must support the possibility of variation—a variety of responses to every question. But a little variation only is not enough in small studies. For example, you might want to compare responses by the race or ethnicity of people at your school. Do you know the percentage of your school's population belonging to a group other than non-Hispanic Caucasian? It is ideal to have as much variation as possible for every topic of interest. If you identified only two categories for race (non-Hispanic whites, nonwhites), you would want 50 percent of the students to be in one category and 50 percent in the other. If you identified, say, four groups (non-Hispanic whites, Hispanic whites, Asians, and African Americans), it would be ideal to have 25 percent of all the students (or cases) in each category. This is maximum variation. Maximum variation is not as important in a study where information is collected from thousands of people in the general population, because it is likely that a critical number of responses will be gathered in each category of interest. It is essential, though, to anticipate a considerable degree of variation of responses when collecting information from a few hundred people, as is the case with this class project.

Therefore if the minority population at your school is quite small, selecting race or ethnicity as a topic would not be wise. This is because it is essentially a **constant** with little variation. When the data for this project are analyzed, responses for each question will be collapsed into two categories or attributes (for race or ethnicity, you would likely compare non-Hispanic whites to all others). The farther away the split in the two groups from 50–50, the less useful the question. This is especially true in studies like ours with a small sample size.

## YOUR TURN: IDENTIFY SOME TOPICS!

With the previous discussion in mind, you're now ready to identify some topics you'd like to investigate further. This is the first step in the research project for this class. Once the class has selected a suitable topic to research, we'll develop it into a hypothesis and collect

some data by performing interviews with other students who are enrolled at your school. Are you ready to put your own ideas to the test?

Keep the limitations of the study in mind in identifying topics that interest you. The topic your class chooses will need to be one that is not embarrassing or otherwise damaging to the students you interview. It should be an appropriate topic for college students, and one that we know will elicit a good deal of variation in your school population.

Have at least three appropriate topic suggestions ready for the day your research topic is discussed in class.

Write your topics here, and your explanation of why it is of interest to you:

*Your Topic, and Why It Is of Interest to You*

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## SUMMARY

Choice of a topic to research is often driven by personal interest and experience, though some research-based organizations choose the topic for their employees to study. Choosing a sociologically relevant topic involves thinking sociologically. This is a process most people do throughout their lives anyway, so it is not difficult. Some sociological topics are social problems, but other topics are more conceptual and have to do with explaining one or more facets of human social behavior.

For this class project, it is important to select possible topics that are relatively impersonal and that are suited to investigation in one semester with college students and to expect variation in the responses to questions about the topic. This is your project! Regardless of the topic your class ultimately selects to investigate, you'll experience the joy of discovery as our activities move us from conceiving of a topic to collecting information that sheds light on it. It's an exercise that only a select few have the opportunity to engage in hands on. *You* are one of them.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do social scientists go about choosing a topic to study?
2. What occupations allow one's personal curiosity to guide the selection of topics for research?
3. What is a sociological problem? How is it related to a social problem? Is it important to understand the difference? Why or why not?
4. What is the difference between beliefs and behavior? Develop a survey question that would measure a belief. Develop a second question that would measure a behavior.
5. Why should your class choose a topic that is rather impersonal? What should be done first to get approval at your institution to investigate a topic that is more personal?
6. Identify a topic that it would not be suitable to investigate with college students. Explain.

## KEY TERMS

**Behaviors** Actions exhibited by units under study. Behaviors can be carried out by individuals or larger social units such as organizations.

**Beliefs** Values or attitudes held by individuals that take on a social component when collectively shared and reinforced by a group.

**Constant** An aspect of social life that has no change or variation within a given context. For example, if everyone in a group is twenty years of age, then age is a constant in that it does not vary in the group.

**Social problem** A characteristic of society generally defined as something that should be reduced or eliminated because of its negative impact.

**Sociological problem** A puzzle regarding human social behavior needing to be solved. Answers to sociological problems are typically generalizable to more than one social situation.

**Variation** A feature of life that differs among individuals or groups. For example, if the ages of individuals in a group range widely between twenty and sixty years, the feature of age for that group exhibits variation.