Table 1.2 | A Sociologist’s Line of Questioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTUAL QUESTION</th>
<th>What happened?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMPARATIVE QUESTION</td>
<td>Did this happen everywhere?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENTAL QUESTION</td>
<td>Has this happened over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEORETICAL QUESTION</td>
<td>What underlies this phenomenon?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the 1980s, there was an increase in the proportion of women in their thirties bearing children for the first time. Was this a global phenomenon or did it occur just in the United States or only in a certain region of the United States? What have been the patterns of childbearing over time? Why are more women now waiting until their thirties to bear children? What factors would we look at to explain this change?

2. REVIEW THE EVIDENCE

Once a research problem is identified, the next step is to review the available evidence. It’s possible that other researchers have already satisfactorily clarified the problem. If not, the sociologist will need to sift through whatever related research does exist to see how useful it is for his or her purposes. What are the other findings? What other investigators have tackled the same phenomenon, and what have they uncovered? Have they looked only at small segments of the population, such as a specific age group, gender, or region? Drawing on others’ ideas helps the sociologist clarify the issues that might be raised and the methods that might be used in the research.

3. MAKE THE PROBLEM PRECISE

A third stage involves working out a clear formulation of the research problem. If relevant literature already exists, the researcher may have a good idea of how to approach the problem. Hunches about the nature of the problem can sometimes be turned into definitive hypotheses—educated guesses about what is going on— at this stage. A hypothesis must be formulated in such a way that the factual material gathered will provide evidence either supporting or disproving it.

4. WORK OUT A DESIGN

The researcher must then decide how to collect the research material or data. Many different research methods exist, and researchers should choose the method for the method that is best suited to the study’s overall objectives and topic. For some purposes, a survey (in which...
5. CARRY OUT THE RESEARCH

Researchers then proceed to carry out the plan developed in step 4. However, practical difficulties may arise, forcing the researcher to rethink his or her initial strategy. Potential subjects may not agree to answer questionnaires or participate in interviews. A business firm may not give a researcher access to its records. Yet omitting such persons or institutions from the study could bias the results, creating an inaccurate or incomplete picture of social reality. For example, it would be difficult for a researcher to answer questions about how corporations have compiled with affirmative action programs if companies that have not compiled do not want to be studied.

6. INTERPRET THE RESULTS

Once the information has been gathered, the researcher’s work is not over—it is just beginning! The data must be analyzed, trends tracked, and hypotheses tested. Most questionnaires are normally used) might be suitable. In other circumstances, interviews or an observational study might be appropriate.

7. REPORT THE FINDINGS

Importantly, researchers must interpret their results in such a way that they tell a clear story, and that they directly address the research puzzle outlined in step 1.

CONCEPT CHECKS ✓

1. What are the seven steps of the research process?

WHAT RESEARCH METHODS DO SOCIOLOGISTS USE?

Table 1.3 | Three of the Main Methods Used in Sociological Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH METHOD</th>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>LIMITATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Usually generates richer and more in-depth information than other methods. Ethnography can provide a broader understanding of social processes.</td>
<td>Can be used to study only relatively small groups or communities. Findings might apply only to groups or communities studied; not easily generalized on the basis of a single fieldwork study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Make possible the efficient collection of data on large numbers of individuals.</td>
<td>Material gathered may be superficial; if questionnaire is highly standardized, important differences among respondents’ viewpoints may be glossed over. Responses may be what people profess to believe rather than what they actually believe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiments</td>
<td>Allow for precise comparisons to be made among the answers of respondents. Influence of specific variables can be controlled by the investigator. Any usually easier for subsequent researchers to repeat.</td>
<td>Many aspects of social life cannot be brought into the laboratory. Responses of those studied may be affected by the experimental situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ETHNOGRAPHY

An investigator using ethnography (firsthand studies of people using participant observation or interviewing) socializes with or works with members of a group, organization, or community and perhaps participates directly in activities. An ethnographer cannot safely influence the groups she studies, but must explain and justify her presence to its members. She must gain the cooperation of the community and sustain it over a period of time, if any worthwhile results are to be achieved.

For a long while, research reports based on participant observation usually omitted any account of the hazards or problems that the researcher had to overcome, but more recently the published reminiscences and diaries of field workers have been more honest and open. The researcher may be frustrated because the members of the group refuse to talk frankly about themselves, direct queries may be welcomed in some contexts but not in others. Some types of fieldwork may be emotionally isolating or even physically dangerous; for instance, a researcher studying street gangs might be seen as a police informer or might become unwittingly embroiled in conflicts with rival gangs.

In traditional works of ethnography, accounts were presented without very much information about the observer. It was believed that an ethnographer could present "objective" observations of the things they studied. More recently, ethnographers have been willing to talk and write about themselves and the nature of their connection to the people under study. For example, a researcher might discuss how her race, class, or gender affected the work, or how the status difference between observer and observed distorted the dialogue between them.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF FIELDWORK

Where it is successful, ethnography provides rich information on the behavior of people in real-world settings. We may develop a better understanding not only of the group but of social processes that transcend the situation under study.

But fieldwork also has serious limitations. Only fairly small groups or communities can be studied. And much depends on the skill of the researcher in gaining the confidence of the individuals involved, without this skill, the researcher is unlikely to get at heart of the matter. The researcher is also a person. A researcher may begin to identify too closely with the group that she loses the perspective of an objective observer. Or she may reach conclusions that are more about her own interests and the situation than those of her readers ever realize. Finally, the findings of field studies are seldom generalizable, meaning that researchers' conclusions may not hold true for other groups or settings.

SURVEYS

When conducting a survey, researchers ask subjects to provide answers to structured questionnaires. The researchers may administer the survey in person, or may mail it to a study participant who will then return the survey by mail. Survey results—especially those based on random samples of the larger population—often can be generalized to the population at large, yet this method provides less in-depth information than the highly descriptive nuanced slices of life obtained in fieldwork.

STANDARDIZED AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Two types of questions are used in surveys: Some contain a standardized, or fixed-choice, set of questions, to which only a fixed range of responses is possible—for instance, Yes/No/Don't know or Very likely/Likely/Unlikely/Very unlikely. Such questions have the advantage that responses are easy to compare and count up because only a small number of categories are involved. However, the information they yield is limited, because they do not allow for subtleties of opinion or verbal expression.

Open-ended questions, by contrast, typically provide more detailed information because respondents may express their views in their own words. The researcher can probe more deeply into what the respondent thinks. The lack of standardization means that answers may be difficult to compare across respondents, however.

In surveys, all the items must be readily understandable to interviewers and interviewees alike. Questions are usually asked in a set order. Large national surveys are conducted regularly by government agencies and research organizations, with interviews carried out more or less simultaneously across the whole country. Those who conduct the interviews and those who analyze the data may not do their work effectively if they constantly had to be checking with each other about ambiguities in the questions or answers.

Survey researchers take care to ensure that respondents can easily understand both the questions and the response categories posed. For instance, a seemingly simple question like "Are you single, married, separated, divorced, or widowed?" Many survey questions are "tried and true" messages that have been used successfully in numerous prior studies. Researchers develop new survey questions often conduct a pilot study to test out new items. A pilot study is a trial run in which a questionnaire is completed by a small number of people, and problematic questions are identified and revised.

SAMPLING

Often sociologists are interested in the characteristics of large numbers of individuals—for example, the political attitudes of the American population as a whole. It would be impossible to study all these people directly, so researchers' solution is to use sampling—to concentrate on a sample, or small proportion, of the overall group. One can usually be confident that results from a sample population can be generalized to the total population, as long as the sample was properly chosen. Studies of only two or three thousand voters, for instance, can give a very accurate indication of the attitudes and voting intentions of the entire population. But to achieve such accuracy, a sample must be representative. The group of individuals studied must be typical of the population as a whole.

A single best procedure for ensuring that a sample is representative is random sampling, in which a sample is chosen so that every member of the population has an equal chance of being included.
equal probability of being included. The most sophisticated way of obtaining a random sample is to assign each member of the population a number and then use a computer to generate a random numbers list, from which the sample is derived—for instance, by picking every tenth number.

EXPERIMENTS

An experiment enables a researcher to test a hypothesis under highly controlled conditions established by the investigator. Experiments are often used in the natural sciences and psychology, as they are considered the best method for ascertaining causality, or the influence of a particular factor on the study's outcome. In an experimental situation, the researcher directly controls the circumstances being studied. Because most experiments occur in laboratories, however, the scope of topics explored is quite restricted. We can bring only small groups of individuals into a laboratory setting, and in such experiments, people know that they are being studied and may behave unnaturally. Experiments also neglect the macro-social context, such as historical or political influences.

Nevertheless, several experimental studies have made important contributions to sociological knowledge. One example is the ingenious experiment carried out by Philip Zimbardo (1972), who set up a make-believe prison, randomly assigning some student volunteers to the role of prison guards and others to the role of prisoners. His aim was to see how one's social role shaped one's attitudes and behavior. The results shocked the investigators. Students who played at being guards quickly assumed an authoritarian manner; they displayed genuine hostility toward the prisoners, ordering them around and verbally abusing and bullying them. The prisoners, by contrast, showed a mixture of apathy and rebelliousness—a response often noted among inmates in real prisons. These effects were so marked and the level of tension so high that the experiment had to be called off after only two weeks. Zimbardo concluded that behavior in prison is influenced more by the nature of the prison situation itself than by the individual characteristics of those involved.

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Comparative research is of central importance in sociology, because it enables researchers to document whether social behavior varies across space, place, and by one's social group membership. For example, divorce rates rose rapidly in the United States after World War II, reaching a peak in the early 1960s, then declining slightly and leveling off in recent years. As many as one in three couples marrying today will divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005a)—a statistic that expresses profound changes taking place in the area of sexual relations and family life. Do these changes reflect specific features of American society? We can find out by comparing divorce rates in the United States with those of other countries. Although the U.S. rate is higher than in most other Western societies, the overall trends are similar. Virtually all Western countries have experienced a steady climb in divorce rates over the past half century.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

A key aspect of the "sociological imagination" is considering ways that historical context shapes individual lives. As such, we frequently need a time perspective to make sense of the material we collect about a particular problem.

Sociologists commonly want to investigate past events directly. Some periods of history can be studied retrospectively, when potential study participants or reporters are still alive—as in the case of the Holocaust in Europe during World War II. Research in oral history means interviewing people about events they witnessed at some point earlier in their lives. This kind of research can stretch back in time at least some sixty or seventy years. For historical research on an earlier period, sociologists depend on the use of documents and written records, often held in special collections at libraries or the National Archives.

An interesting example of the use of historical documents is sociologist Anthony Aschworth's (1989) study of trench warfare during World War I. Aschworth was interested in the lives of men who had to endure being under constant fire, crammed into close proximity for weeks on end. He used a range of documentary sources: official histories of the war, including those written by different military divisions and battalions; official publication of the time; the notes and records kept informally by individual soldiers; and personal accounts of war experiences. He discovered that most soldiers formed their own ideas about how often they intended to engage in combat with the enemy and often effectively ignored the commands of their officers. For example, on Christmas Day, German and Allied soldiers suspended hostilities, and in one place the two sides even staged an informal soccer match. These insights were gleaned from using a rich and diverse array of sources.

Despite the distinctive strengths of ethnography, surveys, experiments, comparative research, and historical analysis, each method has limitations. Sociologists often combine several methods in a single piece of research, using each to supplement and check on the others. This process is known as triangulation. Laura Humphreys's classic Thieves' Trade (1987) study is an example of how researchers may use multiple methods to develop a deep understanding of social behavior. Thieves' Trade is an exploration of the phenomenon within the gay community involving the pursuit of imperious homosexual sex in public restrooms. This study used surveys and observation to obtain fascinating glimpses into the secret lives of gay men. Yet, as we will see in the next section, it also revealed the important ethical challenges faced by sociologists.

WHAT ETHICAL DILEMMAS DO SOCIOLOGISTS FACE?

In his groundbreaking study Thieves' Trade, Humphreys investigated "doubling," or public restrooms where men would go to have sex with other men—often hiding their "secret" lives from their wives, children, and coworkers. Humphreys's study cast a new light on the struggles of men who were forced to keep their sexual proclivities secret. His book led to a deeper understanding of the consequences of the social stigma and legal persecution associated with gay lifestyles.