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# 1

## MAKING THE CASE FOR SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Kristin Kenneavy

### STUDENT LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What is sociology? What is social science?
- 1.2 How do sociological research and the scientific method help us to overcome everyday misperceptions?
- 1.3 What are ways in which social science research is valuable as a life skill?
- 1.4 How does social science research benefit society?

### HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

Kristin Kenneavy

I grew up in a very small town in northeastern Wisconsin. When I was in high school, my English teacher assigned us a research paper. We had to go to the school library and find news articles, books, and other types of primary sources about a topic. I chose women's rights. I don't know why I picked that topic, but it turned out that I really enjoyed learning about it. At that time, in the early 1990s, the modern Women's Movement had been active for decades, and during the 1980s, had already survived what Susan Faludi (1991) had called *Backlash*. Her book, subtitled *The Undeclared War Against American Women*, was about this phenomenon and one of the sources I utilized for the paper I had to write. I subsequently went to college at the University of Oklahoma, and there I continued to explore the topic of women's rights when I took a course called "Sociology of Gender." It was one of the most fascinating classes I had ever taken, and so I decided to declare a minor in sociology. I was already learning a lot about differences in male and female patterns of speech in my major, which was communication. Through graduate school and beyond, most of my work has had a theme of gender running through it. I have studied how gender role attitudes affect whether Americans support civil liberties for gays and lesbians; how media consumption affects gendered dating attitudes among adolescents; and, most recently, how men and women differ in their approaches to acting as active bystanders to prevent interpersonal violence. Hopefully you will find some aspect of sociology that you love, and will continue to learn about it for years to come!

Have you ever wandered around a public place, like a mall or an airport, and spent time people-watching? Perhaps you noticed people of two different ages sitting together and wondered why. Are they a parent and adult child? Are they coworkers? Maybe they are in a cross-generational friendship or romance. You might consider clues that could lead you to favor one of those conclusions over another. How close together are they seated? Are they holding hands? Do they have laptops out in front of them? Most likely you find the process of people-watching to be sort of fun; after all, you get to make observations, and

craft a little story (let's call it a hypothesis) about what you think is happening. If you watch further, you may even be able to gather some evidence that supports your interpretation of the relationship.

If you have engaged in people-watching, then you are already acting like a sociologist who is doing a research project. Although the process of doing research can be complex, and at times even intimidating, try to remember this example. Without even trying, you already know how to do many of the types of techniques on which sociologists rely when they engage in social science research. The big difference is that sociologists do research systematically and scientifically. What does this mean? Let's find out.

## SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Before we go further into the chapter, it is important to define some key terms, like sociology and social science. In a nutshell, sociology is one type of science that falls under the umbrella of a group of related sciences that are collectively known as “social science.” The next sections will go into more detail about the similarities and differences between these two terms.

### What Is Sociology?

**Sociology** is the scientific study of society, including how society shapes individual people and groups, as well as how individual people and groups shape society (Korgen & Atkinson, 2019). Consider the example of Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager who, at age 15, spearheaded a movement of young people to protest global warming. She began by standing outside of Swedish parliament and eventually organized a school climate strike called *Fridays for Future* that became a worldwide phenomenon.

What are some of the ways in which society has shaped Greta's activism? First, she is a young person living in an era when threats to the world environment are considered a very serious issue. As a result, Greta became aware of such environmental problems at a relatively early age. Second, she lives in a democratic nation in which her freedom of speech is protected. In some parts of the world, Greta would not have been able to stage a strike among her fellow students to skip school to protest climate change without serious repercussions or even threats of violence. Finally, Greta lives in a modern era when it is relatively easy to communicate information and spread ideas. As a result, other people in Sweden and around the world joined her in her efforts to bring the dangers of climate change to the attention of world leaders. Without these circumstances, her story would have been very different.

The technological and political landscape, Swedish history and culture, as well as the changing climate all play a role in shaping Greta's life, but Greta has also shaped many aspects of society. She started



Greta Thunberg has been instrumental in bringing more attention to the issue of climate change in recent years. She is seen here alongside President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen at a meeting of the European Union Commission on March 4, 2020.

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out as a single young girl with a sign, but caught the public's attention through her determination and persistence. She is now the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her work related to challenging inaction regarding global warming and other environmental concerns. She has addressed the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, and her speeches have been widely covered in news media reports. By thinking about Greta Thunberg, her global influence, as well as the circumstances that led her to call attention to climate change, and the factors that contributed to her successes, we can begin to understand the complex relationship between individuals and society. Greta's case represents just one example, however. And we don't need to focus on world-famous people in order to examine the interplay of individuals and society. In fact, sociologists research all sorts of people, doing all sorts of things, in all sorts of contexts, in order to understand the relationship between individuals and society (Mills, 1959).



## What Is Social Science?

Sociology is part of a larger body of theory, knowledge, and research techniques known as social science. Before we can discuss social science, it is probably a good idea to identify some of the characteristics of science more generally. Science is an approach to knowledge generation that focuses on collecting data—or observations—using our senses, from the world around us. Scientists use theoretical explanations about such observations as a way to make sense of possible patterns in data. Those patterns can lead scientists to generate **hypotheses**, or testable statements that make predictions about how the world works. Those hypotheses are then tested using more observations, and the cycle begins again. Social science functions in this manner, but instead of making observations about fish, or volcanoes, or diseases, social scientists observe social life.

All social sciences examine aspects of social life, but they do so in different ways. They also tend to ask different types of questions. The social sciences include anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and social geography, to name a few.

You might ask yourself, what do these fields have in common, and how do they differ? One helpful contrast is to think about sociology is different from fields like psychology, political science, or economics. Most likely, a psychologist would approach the issue of a climate change a bit differently from how a sociologist would approach it. Psychologists tend to focus more on individual people and less on the broader society. A psychologist might want to know how people assess the risks associated with climate change or how people think about issues such as recycling. How do attitudes about recycling relate to the identities people hold and ultimately to their behavior? Sociologists who study climate change tend to research it as a general pattern, or social phenomenon. As a result, they may be more likely to examine broad trends in beliefs about science and climate change. They might analyze rates of recycling, how they differ across age groups, municipal areas, or national contexts, and how they may have changed over time, perhaps with respect to historical shifts in a particular society. Political scientists might focus on how flooding due to climate change could be an issue in state elections, and might suggest policy solutions that would address how to coordinate efforts to address an issue like farm waste pollution. Economists might attempt to estimate the costs associated with reducing carbon footprints by consumers cutting down on meals that include meat. Although these examples show that various social sciences have different emphases, the point to remember is that they are all grounded in scientific discovery, about which there will be more discussion in the next section.

### CONSIDER THIS...

We often see psychologists portrayed in popular media. Sociologists are less often featured in the media. How would you explain the difference between psychology and sociology to a friend or roommate?

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.1

### Applying Social Science Research

*In this activity, you will consider the role of research in making important life decisions.*

Think about some of the big decisions you've made in the past, such as your decision to apply to college and your decision about which college to attend. With this in mind, write answers to the following questions:

1. What types of resources did you consult when applying for college?
2. What types of criteria did you consider?
3. How did consulting data help you with your college selection process?

Think about some of the big choices that you may need to make in the future, such as selecting a graduate school, a company or organization for which to work, a town in which to live, or how to invest for retirement.

1. How might knowledge of how to find and assess quality research be helpful in one of these decisions?

### Check Your Understanding

1. How does Greta Thunberg's story illustrate how sociologists think about the world?
2. How is sociology similar to, and different from, other social sciences?

## SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Why should we do social science research? Taking a casual, people-watching approach is a great start, but social scientists are generally trying to arrive at some sort of objective “truth.” Truth? If you are already thinking, “What is truth?,” “Whose truth?,” and “How do we decide how to arrive at the truth?,” then congratulations—you are thinking critically! Luckily, curious, critical thinkers like yourself have been wrestling with these questions for thousands of years. The way in which social scientists approach generating truthful knowledge is by using the scientific method. The scientific method is most often associated with the natural sciences (like chemistry or physics), so you might be surprised to learn that sociologists use it too. We will get into the specifics of the scientific method in just a bit, but first, let's explore why we need help to arrive at the “truth.”

### Our Tricky Human Brains

Imagine if you had to figure out what you should do when you walk into your classroom afresh every day. You'd walk to the door. Should you knock on it or just go in? Should you say “hi” to everyone as you enter? Should you take a seat, or maybe stand at the front of the room? Should you do some much-needed stretches or take out your textbook? Luckily, you don't have to figure this out every day because you have some previous experience with how to enter a classroom. If you had to re-learn this process every time you came to class, your brain would be too worn out to learn anything new.

Humans live in a complex world. We are surrounded by sensory stimuli at all times. As a result, our brains have adapted by creating some shortcuts so that we can do more than just react to the world around us. There are four primary shortcuts that can lead to erroneous conclusions about social life (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

### Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization happens when you rely on a few of your own experiences to make broad claims about other situations or other groups. As an example, perhaps you have witnessed aggravating and unsafe behaviors by people who are in their teens. You may begin to think that *all* teens are prone to misbehavior and are generally out to cause trouble. This process is not dissimilar from what we sometimes call stereotyping, or painting a group of people with a description that may not actually apply to everyone within that group. We need to be careful not to apply our limited knowledge to a group of people or observations with which we are unfamiliar because, when we do so, it limits our ability to correctly perceive what is taking place.

### Selective or Inaccurate Perception

Selective perception is when we pay attention to those things, people, and experiences with which we are most familiar or that align with things that we already believe to be true. Let's return to the example of teens misbehaving. You have already made an overgeneralization that “all teens are out to cause trouble.” How likely are you, then, to notice every time you see a teen behaving badly? Probably more so than you are to notice if adults, elders, or children are behaving badly, right? Part of this process

is failing to notice disconfirming evidence (that is, evidence that challenges what you believe). For instance, do you happen to notice all those teens who are well-behaved and maybe even helpful to others? Probably not. Our brains don't necessarily do this on purpose, but when we only pay attention to certain people, behaviors, or items, we run the risk of misperceiving the world around us by only attending to those observations to which we have become accustomed.

### CONSIDER THIS...

Think about a time when you purchased something new, like a sweet pair of headphones, or maybe your first car. Did it suddenly seem as if that product was everywhere you looked? How might our attention to what is familiar lead us to inaccurate observations about patterns of social behavior?

### Illogical Reasoning

When we reason illogically, it means that we have come to conclusions based on a misinterpretation of the evidence at hand, usually because of faulty assumptions about that evidence. You may be aware of a recent group of vocal advocates called “Flat Earthers.” Members of this group assume that, since they cannot see the curvature of the Earth from their vantage point, the planet is actually flat. Most of us would agree that the Earth is round (or vaguely egg-shaped) because we assume that the photos taken of it from outer space are a representation of a three-dimensional object. When we utilize incorrect assumptions in trying to explain the social life that we experience every day, this could lead us to incorrect conclusions. To continue our example from above, since you already think that teens are the worst, you may conclude that parents and high schools are doing a poor job of socializing and educating teens. However, you would be making an erroneous assumption because you have conflated the assumed characteristics of teenagers with the assumed characteristics of the institutions that mold them.

### Resistance to Change

No one likes to admit they are wrong. But if we never consider new ideas or new information, then we will never learn anything! Imagine you were confronted with some statistics that indicate that most teens actually display behaviors that are very pro-social and positive. Would you want to change your mind about your conclusion that all teenagers are terrible? It is likely that you may actually grumble about this finding because it doesn't square very well with what you believe about teens in general.

In everyday life, we can also overrely on some types of information. For instance, you might fully support a particular politician, but it may not be such a great idea to take everything they say as completely accurate or factual. Similarly, many people rely on information from journalists, religious figures, or even role models, like parents or celebrities, as “truth.” When we rely too heavily on authority figures, we may be misled if *their* own conclusions are incorrect. Finally, another type of information that can lead us astray is “common sense.” Common sense is not always accurate, though we often take it for granted as fact. It's worth remembering that what is common sense to one person may be utter nonsense to another, so it is an unreliable source of knowledge.

Given that these four types of commonplace misperceptions are quite likely to trip us up as we try to arrive at “the truth,” then what steps can we take to try to overcome these problems? Let's return to the idea of the scientific method to help us make accurate claims about social life.



As part of the Fridays for Future movement started by Greta Thunberg, thousands of students staged a protest in Leeds, UK, on November 29, 2019.

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## The Scientific Method

We know that our human brains are easily led astray when we make only casual observations about social life. Luckily, the **scientific method** uses a relatively strict set of steps that can help us to sort fact from fiction. It generally suggests that you first start with a research problem or a research question (What is going on with that mixed-age couple?). You then propose some sort of explanation of why the phenomenon is happening in the way it is (I think they are coworkers), and then you gather data to test whether your explanation was correct (Oops. Now they are holding hands and kissing—probably not coworkers). So, the scientific method works a lot like people-watching except that it demands that observations are empirical and systematic. Let's unpack those terms.

The scientific method demands that we collect **empirical data**, which means that the information can be observed using our human senses. By taking an empirical approach, we cease to rely on previously held beliefs, the authority of others, or common sense. We are being very deliberate about the type of evidence we are going to consider. We basically aren't going to take anyone's word for it that something is true. Rather, we may need others to review our work and verify that our conclusions are correct.

Furthermore, the data must be gathered in a *systematic* fashion. To gather data systematically means that you have to make a plan for how you are going to collect data and let that plan dictate which observations are included and which are left out. In **systematic data collection**, we avoid overgeneralization. Rather than misapplying potentially wrong conclusions based on a handful of observations, we will select observations in a way that will represent a larger population.

Social science should also, ideally, be **replicable**. By being very explicit and transparent about the way in which we went about gathering the data for a study, other social scientists should be able to redo our study and get the same, or similar results. In real life, it isn't particularly common for a study to be replicated (and some really can't be replicated because they are completed in a specific time and place). However, if another researcher were to try to repeat your study faithfully, and if they got completely different results, then researchers would have to consider why the differences emerged. In fact, social science studies often find dissimilar results; these differences force researchers to consider their theories, methods, and findings more critically in order to account for the discrepancies.

Something important to remember is that no *one* social science study is going to be able to establish "the truth" on its own. Rather, we have to think of empirical research as part of an ongoing conversation in which many people are trying to establish truth collectively. This brings up some terms that you should know. When we think that we can see the world as it is, without bringing to our conclusions all our personal experiences, misperceptions, and prior knowledge, we are claiming that we can be **objective**. As you may have guessed, it is almost impossible for any human to be entirely objective because *each of our perspectives is influenced to some extent by our own personal experiences, values, misperceptions, and knowledge*. These can't help but affect the types of problems we choose to study, the ways in which we choose to study them, and how we interpret the data we examine.

If we think of social science research as being part of a larger enterprise that is trying to approximate the truth from multiple perspectives, then we do not have to try to reach objectivity. Instead, we can hope to achieve what is called **intersubjectivity**. Intersubjectivity happens when multiple researchers look at aspects of a research problem, and over time and in collaboration, try to establish some sort of scientific agreement as to what is actually happening with respect to a particular pattern in social life. This may not sound as convincing as having a purely objective stance, but it is certainly much more realistic, and possibly more helpful.

### DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.2

#### Misperceptions and the Media

*In this activity, you will apply common misperceptions to critically analyze an example from the media.*

We often come across research that is presented via news media. Let's say that you come across a news report that states that eating chocolate will help you lose weight. Write four questions you would want to ask about the report. Use the four types of common misperceptions, and your knowledge of the scientific method, to guide your response.

### Check Your Understanding

1. What are four types of thinking that can cloud our ability to correctly perceive social life?
2. What are the benefits of using the scientific method when doing research?
3. What does it mean for research to be empirical, systematic, and replicable?
4. What is the difference between objectivity and intersubjectivity?

## SOCIAL RESEARCH AS A LIFE SKILL

At this point, you may be asking yourself, “Sociology and social science research sound sort of interesting, but what’s in it for me? What am I going to get out of this experience?” Well, there is a reason why pretty much every sociology program in the United States requires a research class. Learning about how to do social science research offers you an opportunity to develop many different skills. The next section will feature four good reasons why learning this material is useful, as opposed to just interesting.

### Making Real-World Decisions

The world around us can be overwhelming. We live in a complex social world that is becoming more globally connected every minute. In the midst of this, we still have to try to make sound life choices. How will understanding social research help with this? Well, one of the critical mindsets that you will develop through this course is healthy skepticism, which will allow you to synthesize information and evaluate competing claims. Think back to Doing Sociology 1.1 earlier in this chapter. You were asked to think about the types of information that you utilized to make decisions about where you would go to college. If you said that you consulted websites that compared colleges and universities based on numerous criteria, then you were utilizing social science research.

A key goal of descriptive social science research is to provide you with facts about a particular entity or phenomenon. What you may not have known is that colleges and universities are often the providers of information to clearinghouse websites. You may now be thinking, “Hey, wait a minute. If the colleges provided those data, then wouldn’t they want to give the website numbers that portray them in the best possible light?” Great job—you are using healthy skepticism to inform that question. Yes. Colleges and universities want to recruit as many bright, prepared students as they can in order to collect tuition and enhance their prestige (giving them the ability to recruit even more bright, prepared students in the future). Thankfully, the vast majority of colleges and universities don’t just make up their outcomes on the criteria that are of interest to prospective students and their families. Instead, there is usually a unit within the college that is tasked with gathering the types of data for which such websites and review magazines are looking. The people working in what are called institutional research offices are trained professionals who often have degrees in—you guessed it—social science research. They may do research on the proportion of graduates who have a job within 6 months of graduating. They may also need to gather information on the types of majors that are available, whether or not there is an active alumni network, and how many students graduate within 4 years of enrolling. These are all important considerations to which students might attend when deciding where to go to college.

Similarly, there will be many instances in which you will need to make informed decisions based on the available research. Your job in this course over the next few months is to become equipped to evaluate the quality of that research. You should start to develop the habit of asking questions like, “Who gathered these data? Are they trained to do it in an ethical and systematic fashion? Who decided that these are important criteria? Have they left out any other criteria that may have been important to my decision? How have these data been reported? Is everyone’s information included, or have some folks’ outcomes been left out so that the numbers look better than they really are?” These types of questions reveal critical thinking skills that will be strengthened by learning about the research process. You can apply them to decisions like choosing a financial adviser, selecting a town in which to buy a home, or evaluating the quality of elementary schools within that town—all important adult life decisions.





Being an active user of social media requires media literacy.

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## Media Literacy

Media are rife with information, and claims about social life abound. You have probably seen thousands of claims like the following: “This toothpaste will freshen your breath *and* whiten your teeth! It’s been scientifically proven!” Even just watching depictions of life on popular television shows can lead you to believe that they represent some sort of social reality. The media, be they news or entertainment-based, convey information about social life. However, much of what is presented can be distorted or exaggerated. Having the ability to sort fact from fiction in news accounts, advertisements, and fictional portrayals is called being **media literate**.

Let’s think through an example. Imagine that you regularly get your news from social media feeds such as Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. You may follow some

sources, but you also click through the news stories that your friends post. As a social scientist, you may ask yourself, “Am I really getting balanced news if I primarily rely on my friends to provide me with links?” Chances are, you are probably not going to get a broad cross-section of news that way.

Knowledge of research methods enables you to understand that your friends are not a random sample of the population. In fact, since they are your friends, it is entirely likely that they have many similarities to you. They may come from the same town, they may be more likely to be of the same political orientation, and they may likely also be of the same age or racial/ethnic group. If this is the case, then you might be consuming news media that are only relevant to what your friends think is interesting or important. If you were inclined to have a more broad-based view of what is happening in the world, you may need to do some research. For instance, you might want to find out how news sources have been measured on a political spectrum, and how they are ranked with respect to providing facts versus presenting an agenda or possibly even misleading information. Being able to ask questions about media presentations, and to find your own news, is facilitated by having a good working knowledge of how to evaluate sources for quality.

## Citizenship

Learning about social science research can also give you insight into the types of laws, policies, and programs that govern much of our social life. There is a tremendous amount of disagreement in the United States, currently, around a wide variety of social policies. How can research help us to make sense of the many political claims that are so prevalent?

Let’s think through an example. A **referendum** is a vote by citizens in a specific area (like a town, or a whole state) about a single political question. Let’s say that there is a referendum in your town about whether or not to build a new community center. Those in favor of the community center claim that it will provide a space for kids, teens, and older adults to utilize for educational and entertainment events. They point to the lack of such a space currently, and argue that the proposed center will foster a deeper sense of community in the town and can also function as a way for key groups to find out about social services and opportunities for involvement in the area. Those opposed to the idea state that the increased tax revenue needed to build, maintain, and staff the facility is greater than the proposed benefits. They also assert that the increased traffic to that part of town is a potential problem and may result in hidden costs, like having to re-time some of the traffic lights. How are you, as a citizen, going to make up your mind about whether the benefits of the community center outweigh the costs?

As someone who knows about social science research, you could start looking into how the pro-community center group came up with their estimates of how many people will use the center. Do their assumptions make logical sense? Have they included a plan for how they will advertise the events that take place in the space? Did they conduct any surveys of residents of the town to see if

they would have an interest in using the center in some way? How are the costs and benefits associated with the proposed community center distributed across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups? All of these issues can be answered if you are able to anticipate and consume research-based information.

In addition, you may want to examine the types of evidence being presented by those opposed to the plan. Have they conducted a traffic study that indicates that there actually would be more cars driving in that particular part of town? What about the increased tax revenue? You would want to examine whether the proposed costs for the project seem to outstrip whatever funds the town has put aside for the project, any anticipated revenues for the center that would balance the costs, and any fund-raising or sponsorship by local businesses that may be planned. Citizens are often faced with complicated choices. Being able to sort through various types of research and ask smart questions about assumptions is a key skill needed by an informed citizen.

## SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

Erin J. Augis

I study ways people engage religious beliefs and practices to effect self-determined actions for social change. For many years, I studied how contemporary West African Muslim women worked for improved living conditions and independence from older generations' norms through conservative, reformist Sunni organizations. Currently, I continue to pursue my curiosity about ways devout people have worked for progress in my new research program on the history of American Protestants who lived in southern Ohio (along the Ohio River) and worked for the abolition of slavery during the 1830s and 40s. Abolition was the first widespread human rights movement in the United States, and Protestants who participated tended to be conservative in religious beliefs and social practices (opposing the consumption of alcohol and emphasizing the importance of theological studies), but they were rigorously progressive in their advocacy for the freedom of enslaved peoples.

Inspired by the research of Ann Hagedorn, author of *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), I focus my studies on the Reverend John Bennington Mahan of Ohio, who died opposing slavery in 1844. *Beyond the River* centers on the abolitionist river town of Ripley, Ohio, and the life of Reverend John Rankin, one of the most active abolitionists in the U.S. leading up to the Civil War. Reverend Mahan was Rankin's close associate, and he aided hundreds of enslaved people in their escapes, also traveling regularly to preach against America's peculiar institution. He went to trial twice and was imprisoned once because he was accused of "stealing" enslaved peoples and disrupting the peace. Although he was acquitted, he became ill in jail and died of tuberculosis that he had likely contracted there. At his arrest, he was denied a writ of *habeus corpus* by the lawyer Thomas Hamer, who was an anti-abolitionist. While today Hamer is nationally lauded as a hero of the Mexican War, Reverend Mahan is largely unknown.

Reverend Mahan's gravestone is small but historically momentous. Although he and his family were bankrupted by the legal costs for his defense, they remained defiant even in his death. His epitaph reads, "Victim of the slave power." "The slave power" was the abolitionists' derisive term for politicians and elite plantation owners who benefited from and defended the predominance of slavery in the American economy. I am working with the National Park Service and local residents to protect Reverend Mahan's grave, and collaborate with area librarians, archivists, and Reverend Mahan's great-great-granddaughter to identify and safeguard the written antislavery sermons, letters, legal depositions, and accounts records that he left behind, which are in various locations in Ohio and Kentucky. I am not only writing sociological analyses of Reverend Mahan's religious and social activism; I am working to preserve the physical artifacts of his human rights legacy for future generations to appreciate.

*Erin J. Augis is a professor of sociology at Ramapo College of New Jersey, where she specializes in the sociology of religion.*

### Discussion Questions

1. What methods of data collection do you think Professor Augis uses to uncover sociological insight into Protestant abolitionists?
2. In what ways has Professor Augis made her academic work public?

## Working in a Career

Finally, one of the key reasons why you are probably reading this book at all is that you are in college, in the hopes of eventually graduating and finding employment, or even opening your own business. You may not know yet what you want to do when you graduate, or maybe you do have an idea and you don't think that it will involve having to do your own research. Perhaps it won't. However, in many types of jobs that sociology students enter, even if you don't end up conducting research, odds are that you will be the *consumer* or *communicator* of some types of research. In addition, being able to indicate on a résumé that you have had some coursework in how to do research may actually help you to land a job in the first place.

Many professions rely upon social research, and students with degrees in sociology go on to work in a wide variety of fields. For instance, police officers may not be at the top of your list in terms of professions that use research, but all police departments actually do gather data. Officers need to keep track of the number of incidents to which they are called, whether there was an arrest, and what type of offense was committed. These statistics are compiled and reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). In turn, this program publishes research reports that keep track of crime trends for the entire United States. Knowledge of crime trends is then utilized by police chiefs to make decisions about the types of training that police officers need and how to deploy their departments' resources.

### CONSIDER THIS...

Take a minute to think about a job that you would really love to do, without worrying about whether it is realistic. In what ways might research knowledge be a useful skill for the job that you envision?

Sociologists work in a wide variety of domains, including social services, government, health care, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, law enforcement and legal services, marketing, international development work, education, and human resources, just to name a few! In all of these fields, being able to locate, understand, critique, and communicate research findings is an important job skill.

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.3

### Questioning News Sources

*In this activity, you will critique the way in which social science research is described in a news media article.*

In 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNBC.com published an article titled "Science says pets can buffer stress, boost productivity and help keep you healthy while you WFH [work from home]" (Stieg, 2020). The article contends that pets help to reduce stress and bolster happiness and work productivity, stating:

*A 2012 study from Virginia Commonwealth University found that employees at a retail business who brought their dogs to work had higher job satisfaction than industry norms and had the lowest levels of stress ratings throughout the day. Of those dog owners who came to work with a dog, 50% said that having their pet present was important to their productivity.*

The research study to which the CNBC article refers, titled "Preliminary investigation of employee's dog presence on stress and organizational perceptions" (Barker et al., 2012), compares the levels of stress, job satisfaction, and perceptions of the employer of three groups: one in which employees brought their dogs to work, a second in which employees did not bring their dogs to work, and another group of workers who didn't have pets. The research article describes the results as follows:

*Combined groups scored significantly higher on multiple job satisfaction subscales than the reference norm group for these scales. No significant differences were found between the groups on physiological stress or perceived organizational support. Although perceived stress was similar at*

*baseline; over the course of the day, stress declined for the DOG group with their dogs present and increased for the NODOG and NOPET groups. The NODOG group had significantly higher stress than the DOG group by the end of the day. A significant difference was found in the stress patterns for the DOG group on days their dogs were present and absent. On dog absent days, owners' stress increased throughout the day, mirroring the pattern of the NODOG group.*

Think about the difference between the two descriptions of this research study.

1. Compare and contrast the titles of each piece. Does one suggest more certainty than the other?
2. How would you describe the tone of each piece? Which words or phrases convey the tone?
3. Consider the fact that the original study focused on a workplace of 450 people and the CNBC.com report is focused on the effects of dog ownership while people are working from home. Do you think that dogs have a similar effect on productivity in home and office settings? Why or why not?
4. The original study examines dog ownership, but the headline of the CNBC.com article speaks of "pets" more generally. Do you think that all pets have similar effects on stress and productivity? Why do you think the CNBC article uses the language of pets more broadly?

### Check Your Understanding

1. How can you utilize healthy skepticism to question information when making a consequential life decision?
2. How can a good working knowledge of how to evaluate sources help you to become media literate?
3. What research skills are important for informed citizens?
4. In what ways might knowledge of social science research assist you in obtaining or performing a job?

## THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH FOR SOCIETY

We've discussed why understanding how to "do" and critique social science research is useful for you, personally. But how is such research beneficial for society? There are numerous ways in which social research can make the world a better place. Let's examine some of the primary societal benefits of social research.

### Document Social Inequalities, Societal Transformations, and Emerging Issues

Society often changes very rapidly. Social science research allows us to document changing social relations. In 2020, people around the world were thrown into a crisis as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families were forced to quarantine at home. Some workers were able to work remotely, but millions of workers were laid off from their jobs, as shown via data regarding unemployment provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the United States alone, well over 100,000 people lost their lives to the virus.

In the midst of the crisis, issues of inequality emerged and were covered in the mainstream press. After politicians and journalists started to call for data on infections and deaths to be released organized by racial and ethnic categories, it became clear that there were disparities in terms of which groups were being infected and dying at higher rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began to release data in April of 2020 that indicated that Black and Latinx Americans were disproportionately affected by the virus, with respect to infections and deaths. Early statistics indicated that Black people represented 34% of infections, but only made up 13% of the overall population of the United States (Artiga et al., 2020). Not only were communities of color being hit harder by the virus's effects, but these communities were also more likely to experience some of the secondary problems caused by COVID-19, such as job loss and food insecurity (Ro, 2020).





People of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as this protester conveys.

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The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of social science data and the organizations tasked with supplying such data. Without the CDC, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and World Health Organization, we would not be able to identify the uneven toll that the COVID-19 pandemic took across racial and ethnic groups. The data they provide are pivotal for documenting and understanding the social determinants of health inequities.

### Challenging Stereotypes and Misinformation

Another benefit that social research has for society is that it enables us to challenge misinformation and stereotypes. You have likely heard our current era described as the “information age.” We are flooded by information on social media, on 24-hour news networks, the radio, and other places, but as discussed previously, the information broadcasted is not always true. Politicians, celebrities, and

influencers make claims about the world that are often “liked” or otherwise supported by thousands of people, giving credibility to these claims even if they are baseless.

Consider when, in 2015, Donald Trump announced his presidential campaign and, in his speech, characterized Mexican immigrants as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists. He said, “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Lee, 2015). Journalists, social scientists, and everyday people turned immediately to social science research, which overwhelmingly showed this stereotype to be untrue. As the National Academies Press (2016) and several others summarized, social science research shows that immigrants have significantly lower crime rates than native-born populations, and communities with a high proportion of immigrants have lower crime rates compared to those with lower proportions of immigration. Social science research was pivotal to addressing this misinformation.

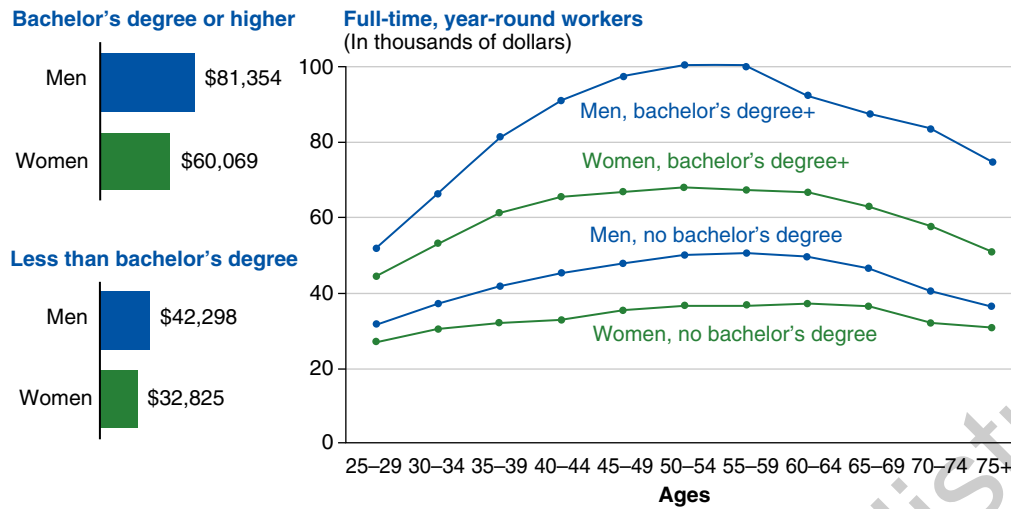
Social science research can not only provide evidence that a claim is incorrect, but it can also complicate statements that are overly general. You may have heard, for example, about the gender wage gap in the United States: the fact that, among full-time, year-round workers in the United States, men continue to earn significantly more than women. But did you know that among workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher, the gender wage gap is significantly worse?

Figure 1.1 shows data collected and analyzed by researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau in 2017. It shows how differences in wages vary for workers of different education levels, and also different ages. Among workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher difference in the “median” or typical wage for men and women workers is about \$21,000. For men and women without a bachelor’s degree, the difference is a little less than \$10,000. But note that men and women without a bachelor’s degree typically make substantially less than men and women with a bachelor’s degree. And, of course, these earning figures are further complicated when race, ethnicity, and occupation are included as well. Knowledge of sociological research methods can help us, as a society, to challenge misinformation and oversimplistic claims.

#### CONSIDER THIS...

Why do you think the gender wage gap is bigger among workers with higher levels of education compared to those with lower levels of education?

**FIGURE 1.1** ■ Median Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers by Education Attainment for Men and Women



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey.

### Inform Public Policies and Programs

Another way in which social science research benefits society as a whole is by its use in policy and program evaluation. Around the world, federal, state, and local governments, international organizations, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies collectively invest billions of dollars to address social problems and to create a better world. How do we know if the programs, policies, initiatives, and products they create are actually achieving their desired goals? Social science research, grounded in solid research methods, is key.

Consider the issue of government funding for early childhood education. Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs that promote "the school readiness of children from birth to age five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development." The programs also offer some services to low-income women who are pregnant (Benefits.gov, n.d.). According to a 2018 report from the Congressional Budget Office, the program served approximately 900,000 children in 2017 and cost taxpayers approximately \$9 billion (averaging approximately \$10,000 per child). These are big numbers. Is the program worth it? Social science research can't tell us if the program is worth it from a moral or ethical point of view, but it can help to clarify the social and economic impact of the program. In fact, analyses of Head Start's return on investment show that the program actually *saves* taxpayers money in the long term—and lots of it! Early education programs help young people to do better in school, graduate from high school, and earn higher wages. By promoting education, investments in early childhood education are also investments in health, well-being, and economic growth. And these outcomes are shown again and again in social science research (Heckman, 2017; [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs\\_impact\\_study\\_final.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf)).

Let's consider a very different example. Your campus almost certainly has policies in place to prohibit unwanted sexual conduct between students. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education changed these policies, and under the Trump administration, the policies changed again. Many people speculated about the impact these changes would have on students, colleges, and universities. Social science research tracking the extent of sexual violence on campus, feelings of comfort and discomfort for students of all genders, instances of interpersonal sexism, changes to institutional support for gender-related issues, and institutional funding patterns more generally, can help us turn speculation into empirical research. The findings from this research can help us to ground the debate about campus sexual harassment and gendered violence in real-world evidence, which in turn can help us to design and sustain policies and programs in line with our values and goals.

## Strengthening Democracy

Public knowledge of social science is also critical for a healthy democracy. In order for a democracy to function well, citizens need to be informed as to issues that are taking place within their town, state, country, and even globally. As discussed previously, much of this information is generated from social science research— research describing patterns and trends in social life, health, and well-being. For democracy to live up to its ideal, members of society need not only to have this information but must also be able to make sense of this information, discuss it, and respond to it in a meaningful way. By learning the ins and outs of sociological research, critically evaluating the claims and information you encounter, and sharing what you know with others, you are actually helping to strengthen our democratic society.

Perhaps even more importantly, learning about sociological research methods sets you up to make a meaningful contribution to collective knowledge—a chance for you to ask and find answers to the questions that are most important for you and your community. As we will discuss throughout this book, putting sociology into action can empower you and your community, and help to build a more socially just world.

### DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.4

#### Checking Your Own Misconceptions

*In this exercise, you will compare your own perceptions of U.S. society to real-world data.*

The U.S. Census Bureau collects data on the characteristics of the U.S. population. Take a moment to consider how you would respond to these questions:

- About how many people are there in the United States?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States are foreign-born?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States are veterans?
- About what percentage of people living in the United States describe themselves as having some sort of disability?
- About what is the typical household income?
- About what percentage of children under the age of 18 are living in poverty?

Now consider the actual data. According to the U.S. Census Bureau:

- The total U.S. population is 328,239,523.
- 13.7% of the people living in the United States are foreign-born.
- 6.9% of people living in the United States are veterans.
- 12.7% of people living in the United States describe themselves as having a disability.
- The median household income is \$65,712.
- 16.8% of children under the age of 18 are living in poverty.

Write your answers to the following questions:

1. How greatly did your perceptions vary from the actual data?
2. Are you surprised by any of these findings? Why or why not?
3. Choose one fact that stands out to you as particularly interesting or important. What makes this information especially interesting or important?

#### Check Your Understanding

1. How does social science research help us to understand social inequalities?
2. How can social science research help us to combat stereotypes and misinformation?
3. How might social science research inform policies and programs that affect our lives?
4. In what ways can social science research help us to strengthen democracy?

## CONCLUSION

You should now have a greater understanding of what social science entails, how it has the potential to benefit you, and how it has the potential to benefit society as a whole. It is important to keep in mind that humans cannot always perceive the world accurately due to misperceptions. As a result, we can utilize the scientific method, which allows us to gather empirical observations about the world around us. This systematic approach to accumulating accurate information is indispensable. By increasing our knowledge of how to conduct and evaluate social science research, we are strengthening our own skills: our ability to use research to make decisions, to navigate a complex media landscape, to understand job prospects, and to become better citizens. Finally, it is important to recognize the many ways in which social science research can make the world a better place. Some of these ways include documenting social inequalities, disputing harmful stereotypes, informing policies and programs, and strengthening democracy. In the next chapter, you will begin your journey into learning about sociological research by starting to understand the role of theory, or explanations about patterns in social life.

## REVIEW

### 1.1 What is sociology? What is social science?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how society shapes individual people and groups, as well as how individual people and groups shape society. Sociologists research all sorts of people, doing all sorts of things, in all sorts of contexts, in order to understand the relationship between individuals and society. Sociology is part of a larger body of theory, knowledge, and research techniques known as social science. Social science is a form of science that investigates the social world. As a science, social science is an approach to knowledge generation that focuses on collecting data—or observations—using our senses, from the world around us. Scientists use theoretical explanations about such observations as a way to make sense of possible patterns in data. Those patterns can lead scientists to generate hypotheses, or testable statements that make predictions about how the world works. Those hypotheses are then tested using more observations, and the cycle begins again.

### 1.2 How do sociological research and the scientific method help us to overcome everyday misperceptions?

There are at least four types of everyday misperceptions: Overgeneralization occurs when you rely on a few of your own experiences to make broad claims about other situations or other groups. Selective perception is when we pay attention to those things, people, and experiences with which we are most familiar or that align with things that we already believe to be true. Reasoning illogically means that we have come to conclusions based on a misinterpretation of the evidence at hand, usually because of faulty assumptions about that evidence. And being resistant to change is when we fail to change our minds in light of new evidence. The scientific method helps us to overcome these misperceptions by guiding us to make systematic observations about the social world, to argue logically about the explanations for the patterns that we detect, and to be open to new information that could result in a different explanation for a pattern.

### 1.3 What are ways in which social science research is valuable as a life skill?

With respect to making sound life decisions, a critical mindset that you will develop through learning about sociological research is healthy skepticism, which will allow you to synthesize information and evaluate competing claims. Another important life skill is media literacy. Much of what is presented can be distorted or exaggerated. Having the ability to sort fact from fiction in news accounts, advertisements, and fictional portrayals is called being media literate. A third way in which social science knowledge is valuable is in the context of working in a career. Many career paths utilize sociological research. Even if you don't envision yourself doing research



someday, it's quite possible that you might need to consume or explain social research to others in the course of your job. Finally, learning about social science research can also give you insight into the types of laws, policies, and programs that govern much of our social life. There is currently a tremendous amount of disagreement in the United States around a wide variety of social policies. Understanding social research that examines such policies can make you a better citizen.

#### 1.4 How does social science research benefit society?

Social science research helps us to document social inequalities, societal transformations, and emerging issues. Society often changes very rapidly. Social science research allows us to understand changing social relations. Another benefit that social research has for society is that it enables us to challenge misinformation and stereotypes. Research can be gathered to dispute claims that might malign a particular group of individuals. A third way in which social science research benefits society as a whole is by its use in policy and program evaluation. How do we know if the programs, policies, initiatives, and products they create are actually achieving their desired goals? Social science research, grounded in solid research methods, is key. Finally, for democracy to live up to its ideal, members of society need not only to have information, but must also be able to make sense of this information, discuss it, and respond to it in a meaningful way. By learning the ins and outs of sociological research, critically evaluating the claims and information you encounter, and sharing what you know with others, you are actually helping to strengthen our democratic society.

#### KEY TERMS

empirical data  
hypotheses  
intersubjectivity  
media literate  
objective  
referendum  
replicable  
scientific method  
sociology  
systematic data collection