

SOCIOLOGY & *Everyday Life*



The Sociology of Suicide Trends Today

Instagram Posts:

"Molak's an ape. The monkey looking human gets his woman stolen."

"Put um inna coffin. Put em 6 feet under."

David Molak's Girlfriend's Post:

"...I don't think this is funny... STOP ALL OF YOU."

—After a 16-year-old San Antonio student committed suicide, a local television station obtained these screenshots from a private Instagram account that revealed David Molak had been the target of prolonged cyberbullying by students at his previous high school even after he began attending another school and his girlfriend tried to get other people to stop their behavior (Mendoza, 2016).

"Why are you alive?"

"You're ugly."

"You should die."

"Why don't you go kill yourself."

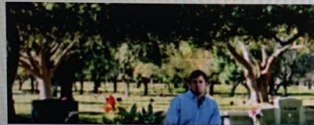
"Can u die please?"

—After more than a year of receiving online bullying comments like these, Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a 12-year-old Tampa, Florida, girl, jumped to her death from a concrete silo tower at an abandoned cement plant. After her death, law enforcement officials stated that she was "absolutely terrorized on social media" (Alvarez, 2013), while psychologists pointed out that she had been a victim of the "cool to be cruel" cyberculture (Ng, 2013).

"You think you want to die, but in reality you just want to be saved."

—Hanna Smith posted a picture of this statement written in a spiral notebook to her Facebook page less than 24 hours prior to killing herself (Dolan and Robinson, 2013).

Cliff Molak visits the grave of his brother David, who committed suicide after being cyberbullied.



How Much Do You Know About Suicide?

TRUE	FALSE		
T	F	1	After cancer and heart disease, suicide accounts for more years of life lost than any other cause of death in the United States.
T	F	2	Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have the highest suicide rate in the United States.
T	F	3	White males account for about 65 percent of all U.S. suicides.
T	F	4	Although females are more likely to attempt suicide, males are more likely to complete suicide (take their own life).
T	F	5	Each year about 500,000 suicide deaths occur worldwide.
T	F	6	Firearms are the most commonly used method of suicide among males and females.
T	F	7	Alcohol intoxication is present in nearly one-fourth of all suicide deaths in the United States.
T	F	8	Studies show that for people between the ages of 18 and 22, those who are attending college full time are less likely to attempt suicide or receive medical attention as a result of a suicide attempt than persons in the same age category who are not full-time college students.

Answers can be found at the end of the chapter.



Suicides committed by young people who have been the victims of online bullying deeply touch the lives of their families, friends, and others who have not even met them. Although we will never know the full story of what happened to David Molak and the others described, these tragic occurrences bring us to larger sociological questions: Why does anyone commit suicide? Is suicide purely an individual phenomenon, or is it related to our social interactions and the social environment and society in which we live? How have technologies such as smartphones and social media affected our communication—both positively and negatively—with others?

As you are well aware, social media use among teens and college students continues to grow rapidly. You are engulfed by smartphones, tablets, and computers. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other Internet-based social networking sites are taken for granted. You enjoy the positive effects of social media, but the digital age may also produce harmful outcomes, particularly when some people harass others, causing psychological and physical harm and sometimes even bullying them into suicide.

Although suicide may seem like a “downer” for your study of sociology, I have chosen this topic because it is one of the first social issues that early sociologists studied. These thinkers believed that identifying the *social causes* of such behavior sets sociology apart from psychology, philosophy, and other areas of inquiry.

Putting Social Life into Perspective

Sociology is the systematic study of human society and social interaction. It is a *systematic* study because sociologists apply both theoretical perspectives and research methods (or orderly approaches) to examinations of social behavior. Sociologists study human societies and their social interactions in order to develop theories of how human behavior is shaped by group life and how, in turn, group life is affected by individuals.

sociology
the systematic study of human society and social interaction.

Why Should You Study Sociology?

Sociology helps you gain a better understanding of yourself and the social world. It enables you to see how the groups to which you belong and the society in which you live largely shape behavior. A **society** is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations, such as the United States, Mexico, or Nigeria. Many changes are occurring in the twenty-first century. Many societies have not only dominant cultural groupings and expectations but also many smaller groupings that have their own unique cultural identities. Migration and interdependence have shifted the meaning of *society* in the twenty-first century.

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Examining the world order helps us understand that each of us is affected by *global interdependence*—a relationship in which the lives of all people are closely intertwined and any one nation's problems are part of a larger global problem. Environmental problems are an example: People throughout the world share the same biosphere. When environmental degradation, such as removing natural resources or polluting the air and water, takes place in one region, it may have an adverse effect on people around the globe.

You can make use of sociology on a more personal level. Sociology enables us to move beyond established ways of thinking, thus allowing us to gain new insights into ourselves and to develop a greater awareness of the connection between our own "world" and that of other people. According to the sociologist Peter Berger (1963: 23), sociological inquiry helps us see that "things are not what they seem." Sociology provides new ways of approaching social problems and making decisions in everyday life. For this reason, people with knowledge of sociology are employed in a variety of fields that apply sociological insights to everyday life (see • Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 Fields That Use Social Science Research

In many careers, including jobs in health and human services, business, communication, academia, and law, the ability to analyze social science research is an important need.

Health and Human Services	Business	Communication	Academia	Law
Counseling Education Medicine Nursing Social Work	Advertising Labor Relations Management Marketing	Broadcasting Public Relations Journalism	Anthropology Economics Geography History Information Studies Media Studies/ Communication	Law Criminal Justice

The Sociological Imagination

Do you wonder how your daily life compares to what other people are doing? Our interest in Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media sites reflects how fascinated we are by what other people are thinking and doing. But how can you really link your personal life with what is going on with other people in the larger social world? You can make an important linkage known as the sociological imagination.

Sociological reasoning is often referred to as the **sociological imagination**—the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society (Mills, 1959b). The sociological imagination is important to each of us because having this awareness enables us to understand the link between our personal experiences and the social contexts in which they occur. Each of us lives in a society, and we live out a biography within some historical setting. Throughout your life, you contribute to the shaping of society and to its history, even as you are made by society and the historical events that take place during your lifetime. The sociological imagination will enable you to grasp the relationship between history at the societal level and your own biography at the individual level. It also helps you distinguish between personal troubles and social (or public) issues. *Personal troubles* are private problems that affect individuals and the networks of people with whom they regularly associate. As a result, individuals within their immediate social settings must solve those problems. For example, one person being unemployed may be a personal trouble. *Public issues* are problems that affect large numbers of people and often require solutions at the societal level. Widespread unemployment as a result of economic changes such as plant closings is an example of a public issue. The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as losing one's job or feeling like committing suicide, into a larger social context, where we can distinguish whether and how personal troubles may be related to public issues. Let's compare the two perspectives by looking at suicide.

sociological imagination

C. Wright Mills's term for the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.

SOCIOLOGY in *Global Perspective*



Durkheim's Classical Study of Suicide Applied to Twenty-First-Century Young People in India

The bond attaching [people] to life slackens because the bond which attaches [them] to society is itself slack.

—Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (1964b/1897)

Although this statement described social conditions accompanying the high rates of suicide found in late-nineteenth-century France, Durkheim's words ring true today as we look at contemporary suicide rates for young people in cities such as New Delhi, India. Suicide rates in India are highest in the 15–29 age category and are especially high among those living in the wealthier and more educated regions of the nation (NDTV.com, 2012; *Lancet*, 2012).

Doesn't this seem unlikely? Many people think rural farmers facing poor harvests and high debt would have the greatest risk of suicide; however, this has not proven true in India. At first glance, we might think that economic success and a good education would provide insurance against suicide because of the greater happiness and job satisfaction among individuals in cities such as New Delhi, as these individuals have gained new opportunities and higher salaries in recent years. However, this economic boom—including the more open markets of India in the past 20 years—has not only created new opportunities for people; these changes have also contributed to rapid urbanization and weakened social ties. The result? Intensified job anxiety, higher expectations, and more pressure for individual

Individuals have gained new opportunities and higher salaries in recent years. However, this economic boom—including the more open markets of India in the past 20 years—has not only created new opportunities for people; these changes have also contributed to rapid urbanization and weakened social ties. The result? Intensified job anxiety, higher expectations, and more pressure for individual achievement. Social bonds have been weakened or dissolved as people move away from their families and their community. Ironically, newer technologies such as cell phones and social networking sites have contributed to the breakdown of traditional family units as communication has become more impersonal and fragmented.

In addition, life in the cities moves at a much faster pace than in the rural areas, and many individuals experience loneliness, sleep disorders, family discord, and major health risks such as heart disease and depression (Mahapatra, 2007). In the words of Ramachandra Guha (2004), a historian residing in India, Durkheim's sociology of suicide remains highly relevant to finding new answers to this challenging problem: "The rash of suicides in city and village is a qualitatively new development in our history. We sense that tragedies are as much social as they are individual. But we know very little of what lies behind them. What we now await, in sum, is an Indian Durkheim."

Durkheim's words about suicide still ring true today in India, where suicide rates for young people in cities such as New Delhi are high, particularly among those in the 15–29 age category. Why might an economic boom not only create new opportunities but also intensify social problems such as high rates of suicide when social change is linked to rapid urbanization and weakening social ties?



REFLECT & ANALYZE

How does sociology help us examine seemingly private acts such as suicide within a larger social context? Why are some people more inclined to commit suicide if they are not part of a strong social fabric and have, at the same time, high job anxiety and intensive pressure to achieve?

Suicide as a Personal Trouble Have you ever heard someone say, "They have no one to blame but themselves" regarding some problem? In everyday life, we often blame other people for "creating" their own problems. Although individual behavior can contribute to social problems, our individual experiences are often largely beyond our own control. They are determined by society as a whole—by its historical development and its organization. In everyday life we often blame individuals for creating or contributing to their own problems. If a person commits suicide, many people consider it to be strictly the result of that individual's own personal problems, not the social world in which the person lived.

Suicide as a Public Issue If we use the sociological imagination to look at the problem of suicide, however, we can see that it is often a public issue—a societal problem. Early sociologist Emile Durkheim refused to accept commonsense explanations of suicide. In what is probably the first sociological study to use scientific research methods, he related suicide to the issue of anomie (a lack of fit) in society instead of viewing suicide as an isolated act that an

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The Importance of a Global Sociological Imagination

How is it possible to think globally when you live in one location and have been taught to think a certain way? Although we live in one country and rely heavily on Western sociological theory and research, we can access the world beyond the United States and learn to develop a more comprehensive *global* approach for the future. One way we can do this is to reach beyond studies that have focused primarily on the United States to look at the important challenges we face in a rapidly changing world and develop a more comprehensive *global* approach for the future (see • Figure 1.2). These issues range from political and economic instability to environmental concerns, natural disasters, and terrorism. We can also examine the ways in which nations are not on equal footing when it comes to economics and politics.

The world’s **high-income countries** are nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income. Examples include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe.

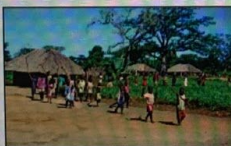
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As compared with other nations of the world, many high-income nations have a high standard of living and a lower death rate because of advances in nutrition and medical technology. However, not everyone living in a so-called high-income country has these advantages.

FIGURE 1.2 The World’s Economies in the Early Twenty-First Century
High-income, middle-income, and low-income countries.



High Income: New York, United States



Low Income: Congo

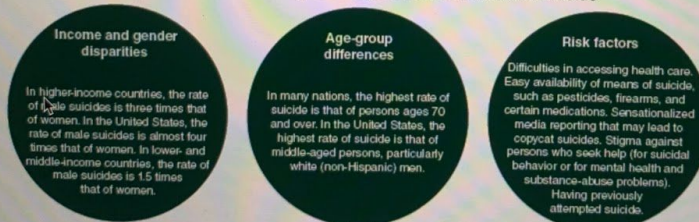


Middle Income: China



Photos, left to right: John Berry/Syracuse Newspapers/The Image Works; Gable/Alamy Stock Photo; Philipbigg/Alamy Stock Photo

FIGURE 1.3 Using Our Global Sociological Imagination to Understand Suicide



Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015a; World Health Organization, 2015a.

In contrast, *middle-income countries* are nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and personal income. Examples of middle-income countries include the nations of Eastern Europe and many Latin American countries.

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Low-income countries are primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income. Examples of low-income countries include many of the nations of Africa and Asia, particularly India and the People's Republic of China, where people typically work the land and are among the poorest in the world. However, generalizations are difficult to make because there are wide differences in income and standards of living within many nations (see Chapter 8, "Global Stratification").

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If we look at the problem of suicide from a global perspective, we find that it is a major concern: Worldwide, more than 800,000 people die by suicide every year. In addition, many more people attempt suicide. Based on what you have read above about high-, middle-, and low-income countries, it is important for us to think about the fact that about 75 percent of global suicides occur in low- and middle-income nations. Risk factors are shown in • Figure 1.3.

Throughout this text we will continue to develop our sociological imaginations by examining social life in the United States and other nations. The future of our nation is deeply intertwined with the future of all other nations of the world on economic, political, environmental, and humanitarian levels.

Whatever your race/ethnicity, class, sex, or age, are you able to include in your thinking the perspectives of people who are quite different from you in experiences and points of view? Before you answer this question, a few definitions are in order. *Race* is a term used by many people to specify groups of people distinguished by physical characteristics such as skin color. *Ethnicity* refers to the cultural heritage or identity of a group and is based on factors such as language or country of origin. *Class* is the relative location of a person or group within the larger society, based on wealth, power, prestige, or other valued resources. *Sex* refers to the biological and anatomical differences between females and males. By contrast, *gender* refers to the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with sex differences, referred to as *femininity* and *masculinity*. Although these terms sound very precise, they often do not have a precise meaning and are, instead, social constructions that people use to justify social inequalities. When we refer to something as a "social construction," we mean that race, ethnicity, class, and gender do not really indicate anything apart from the social meaning that people in a given society confer on them. However, the result is that we may—either intentionally or unintentionally—privilege some categories of people over others who are placed in disadvantaged or subordinate positions. In sum, a "social construction of reality" occurs when large numbers of people act and respond as if these categories exist in reality rather than having been socially created.

LO3

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The Development of Sociological Thinking

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Throughout history, social philosophers and religious authorities have made countless observations about human behavior. However, the idea of observing how people lived, finding out what they thought, and doing so in a systematic manner that could be verified did not take hold until the nineteenth century and the social upheaval brought about by industrialization and urbanization.

FIGURE 1.4 As the Industrial Revolution swept through the United States beginning in the nineteenth century, children being employed in factories became increasingly common. Social thinkers soon began to explore such new social problems brought about by industrialization.



Industrialization is the process by which societies are transformed from dependence on agriculture and handmade products to an emphasis on manufacturing and related industries. This process occurred first during the Industrial Revolution in Britain between 1760 and 1850, and was soon repeated throughout Western Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization was well under way in the United States. Massive economic, technological, and social changes occurred as machine technology and the factory system shifted the economic base of these nations from agriculture to manufacturing: textiles, iron smelting, and related industries. Many people who had labored on the land were forced to leave their tightly knit rural communities and sacrifice well-defined social relationships to seek employment as factory workers in the emerging cities, which became the centers of industrial work.

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urbanization

the process by which an increasing proportion of a population lives in cities rather than in rural areas.

These living and working conditions led to the development of new social problems: inadequate housing, crowding, unsanitary conditions, poverty, pollution, and crime. Wages were so low that entire families—including very young children—were forced to work, often under hazardous conditions and with no job security. As these conditions became more visible, a new breed of social thinkers tried to understand why and how society was changing.

The Origins of Sociology as We Know It

At the same time that urban problems were growing worse, natural scientists had been using reason, or rational thinking, to discover the laws of physics and the movement of the planets. Social thinkers started to believe that by applying the methods developed by the natural sciences, they might discover the laws of human behavior and apply these laws to solve social problems. Historically, the time was ripe because the Age of Enlightenment had produced a belief in reason and humanity's ability to perfect itself.

Early Thinkers: A Concern with Social Order and Stability

Early social thinkers—such as Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim—were interested in analyzing social order and stability, and many of their ideas have had a dramatic and long-lasting influence on modern sociology.



Auguste Comte (1788–1857) was an important figure in the development of sociology. He is shown here in a portrait by the French artist L. Berry.

Auguste Comte The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term *sociology* from the Latin *socius* (“social, being with others”) and the Greek *logos* (“study of”) to describe a new science that would engage in the study of society. Even though he never actually conducted sociological research, Comte is considered by some to be the “founder of sociology.” Comte’s theory that societies contain *social statics* (forces for social order and stability) is

social dynamics (forces for conflict and change) has been used throughout the history of sociology.

Comte stressed that the methods of the natural sciences should be applied to the objective study of society. He sought to unlock the secrets of society so that intellectuals like him could become the new secular (as contrasted with religious) "high priests" of society. For Comte, the best policies involved order and authority. He envisioned that a new consensus would emerge on social issues and that the new science of sociology would play a significant part in the reorganization of society.

Comte's philosophy became known as **positivism**—a belief that the world can best be understood through scientific inquiry. He believed that positivism had two dimensions: (1) methodological—the application of scientific knowledge to both physical and social phenomena, and (2) social and political—the use of such knowledge to predict the likely results of different policies so that the best one might be chosen.

positivism

a belief that the world can best be understood through scientific inquiry.

Social analysts have praised Comte for his advocacy of sociology and for his insights regarding linkages between the social structural elements of society (such as family, religion, and government) and social thinking in specific historical periods.

Today, sociology is recognized as a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) discipline that is actively involved in the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, the largest general science organization worldwide. Sociology is also a core part of applied science and has been incorporated into the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test), an exam that includes questions on basic sociology as well as other social and behavioral sciences (Hillsman, 2015). The advocacy of Comte and other early social thinkers about the scientific contributions of sociology continues into the twenty-first century, many years beyond their initial endeavors.



Harriet Martineau Comte's works were made more accessible for a wide variety of scholars through the efforts of the British sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Until fairly recently, Martineau received no recognition in the field of sociology, partly because she was a woman in a male-dominated discipline and society. Not only did she translate and condense Comte's works, but she was also an active sociologist in her own right. Martineau studied the social customs of Britain and the United States, analyzing the consequences of industrialization and capitalism. In *Society in America* (1837), she examined religion, politics, child rearing, slavery, and immigration, paying special attention to social distinctions based on class, race, and gender. Her works explore the status of women, children, and "sufferers" (persons who are considered to be criminal, mentally ill, handicapped, poor, or alcoholic).

Martineau was also an advocate of social change, encouraging greater racial and gender equality. She was also committed to creating a science of society that would be grounded in empirical observations and widely accessible to people. She argued that sociologists should be impartial in their assessment of society but that it is entirely appropriate to compare the existing state of society with the principles on which it was founded. Martineau believed that a better society would emerge if women and men were treated equally, enlightened reform occurred, and cooperation existed among people in all social classes (but led by the middle class).





Herbert Spencer/Getty Images

Herbert Spencer Unlike Comte, who was strongly influenced by the upheavals of the French Revolution, the British social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was born in a more peaceful and optimistic period in his country's history. Spencer's major contribution to sociology was an evolutionary perspective on social order and social change. Evolutionary theory helps to explain how organic and/or social change occurs in societies. According to Spencer's Theory of General Evolution, society, like a biological organism, has various interdependent parts (such as the family, the economy, and the government) that work to ensure the stability and survival of the entire society.

Spencer believed that societies develop through a process of “struggle” (for existence) and “fitness” (for survival), which he referred to as the “survival of the fittest.” Because this phrase is often attributed to Charles Darwin, Spencer's view of society is known as **social Darwinism**—the belief that those species of animals, including human beings, best adapted to their environment survive and prosper, whereas those poorly adapted die out. Spencer equated this process of *natural selection* with progress because only the “fittest” members of society would survive the competition.

social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer's belief that those species of animals, including human beings, best adapted to their environment survive and prosper, whereas those poorly adapted die out.

Critics believe that Spencer's ideas are flawed because societies are not the same as biological systems; people are able to create and transform the environment in which they live. Moreover, the notion of the survival of the fittest can easily be used to justify class, racial-ethnic, and gender inequalities.



Emile Durkheim/Getty Images

Emile Durkheim French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) stressed that people are the product of their social environment and that behavior cannot be understood fully in terms of *individual* biological and psychological traits. He believed that the limits of human potential are *socially* based, not *biologically* based.

In his work *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1964a/1895), Durkheim set forth one of his most important contributions to sociology: the idea that societies are built on social facts. **Social facts** are patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside any one individual but that exert social control over each person. Durkheim believed that social facts must be explained by other social facts—by reference to the social structure rather than to individual attributes.

social facts

the actors involved) in much of Durkheim's theorizing.

Lo4

Identify reasons why many early social thinkers were concerned with social change.

Differing Views on the Status Quo: Stability or Change?

Together with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, Durkheim established the direction of modern sociology. We will look first at Marx's and Weber's divergent thoughts about conflict and social change in societies and then at Georg Simmel's microlevel analysis of society.



Ben White-Holmes/Getty Images

Karl Marx In sharp contrast to Durkheim's focus on the stability of society, German economist and philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) stressed that history is a continuous clash between conflicting ideas and forces. He believed that conflict—especially class conflict—is necessary in order to produce social change and a better society. For Marx, the most important changes are economic. He concluded that the capitalist economic system was responsible for the overwhelming poverty that he observed in London at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Marx and Engels, 1967/1848).

In the Marxian framework, *class conflict* is the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist class, or *bourgeoisie*, is those who own and control the means of production—the tools, land, factories, and money for investment that form the economic basis of a society. The working class, or *proletariat*, is those who must sell their labor because they have no other means to earn a livelihood. From Marx's viewpoint, the capitalist class controls and exploits the masses of struggling workers by paying less than the value of their labor. This exploitation results in workers' *alienation*—a feeling of powerlessness and estrangement from other people and from themselves. Marx predicted that the working class would become aware of its exploitation, overthrow the capitalists, and establish a free and classless society.

Marx is regarded as one of the most profound sociological thinkers; however, his social and economic analyses have also inspired heated debates among generations of social scientists. Central to his view was the belief that society should not just be studied but should also be changed, because the status quo involved the oppression of most of the population by a small group of wealthy people. Those who believe that sociology should be value free (see below) are uncomfortable with Marx's advocacy of what some perceive to be radical social change. As well, scholars who examine society through the lens of race, gender, and class believe that his analysis places too much emphasis on class relations.



Heinrich Heine and Gustav Langen



Max Weber German social scientist Max Weber (pronounced VAY-ber) (1864–1920) was also concerned about the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Although he disagreed with Marx's idea that economics is *the* central force in social change, Weber acknowledged that economic interests are important in shaping human action. Even so, he thought that economic systems were heavily influenced by other factors in a society.

Unlike many early analysts who believed that values could not be separated from the research process, Weber emphasized that sociology should be *value free*—research should be done scientifically, excluding the researcher's personal values and economic interests. However, Weber realized that social behavior cannot be analyzed by purely objective criteria. Although he recognized that sociologists cannot be totally value free, Weber stressed that they should employ *verstehen* (German for “understanding” or “insight”) to gain the ability to see the world as others see it. In contemporary sociology, Weber's idea is incorporated into the concept of the sociological imagination (discussed earlier in this chapter).

Weber was also concerned that large-scale organizations (bureaucracies) were becoming increasingly oriented toward routine administration and a specialized division of labor, which he believed were destructive to human vitality and freedom. According to Weber, rational bureaucracy, rather than class struggle, is the most significant factor in determining the social relations between people in industrial societies. From this view, bureaucratic domination can be used to maintain powerful (capitalist) interests. As discussed in Chapter 5 (“Groups and Organizations”), Weber's work on bureaucracy has had a far-reaching impact.

Weber also provided important insights on the process of rationalization, bureaucracy, religion, and many other topics. In his writings, Weber was more aware of women's issues than many of the scholars of his day. Perhaps his awareness at least partially resulted from the fact that his wife, Marianne Weber, was an important figure in the women's movement in Germany.



Georg Simmel At about the same time that Durkheim was developing the field of sociology in France, the German sociologist Georg Simmel (pronounced ZIM-mel) (1858–1918) was theorizing about the importance of social change in his own country and elsewhere. Simmel was also focusing on how society is a web of patterned interactions among people (* Figure 1.5). In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (1950/1902–1917), he described how social interactions are different based on the size of the social group. According to Simmel, interaction patterns differ between a *dyad* (a social group with two members) and a *triad* (a group with three members) because the presence of an additional person often changes the dynamics of communication and the overall interaction process. Simmel also developed *formal sociology*, an approach that focuses attention on the universal social forms that underlie social interaction. He referred to these forms as the “geometry of social life.”

FIGURE 1.5 According to the sociologist Georg Simmel, society is a web of patterned interactions among people. If we focus on the behavior of individuals only, we miss the underlying forms that make up the “geometry of social life.”



we miss the underlying forms that make up the geometry of social life.



Like the other social thinkers of his day, Simmel analyzed the impact of industrialization and urbanization on people's lives. He concluded that class conflict was becoming more pronounced in modern industrial societies. He also linked the increase in individualism, as opposed to concern for the group, to the fact that people now had many cross-cutting "social spheres"—membership in a number of organizations and voluntary associations—rather than the singular community ties of the past.

Simmel's contributions to sociology are significant. He wrote more than thirty books and numerous essays on diverse topics, leading some critics to state that his work is fragmentary and piecemeal. However, his thinking has influenced a wide array of sociologists, including the members of the "Chicago School" in the United States.

The Origins of Sociology in the United States

From Western Europe, sociology spread in the 1890s to the United States, where it thrived as a result of the intellectual climate and the rapid rate of social change. The first departments of sociology in the United States were located at the University of Chicago and at Atlanta University, then an African American school.

The Chicago School The first department of sociology in the United States was established at the University of Chicago, where the faculty was instrumental in starting the American Sociological Society (now known as the American Sociological Association). Robert E. Park (1864–1944), a member of the Chicago faculty, asserted that urbanization has a disintegrating influence on social life by producing an increase in the crime rate and in racial and class antagonisms that contribute to the segregation and isolation of neighborhoods (Ross, 1991). George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), another member of the faculty at Chicago, founded the symbolic interaction perspective, which is discussed later in this chapter.





Jane Addams (1860–1935) is one of the best-known early women sociologists in the United States because she founded Hull House, one of the most famous settlement houses, in an impoverished area of Chicago. Throughout her career, she was actively engaged in sociological endeavors: She lectured at numerous colleges, was a charter member of the American Sociological Society, and published a number of articles and books. Addams was one of the authors of *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, a ground-breaking book that used a methodological technique employed by sociologists for the next forty years. She was also awarded a Nobel Prize for her assistance to the underprivileged. In recent years, Addams has received greater recognition from contemporary sociologists because of her role as an early theorist of social change who influenced later feminist theorists and activists.



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W. E. B. Du Bois and Atlanta, University The second department of sociology in the United States was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) at Atlanta University. He created a laboratory of sociology, instituted a program of systematic research, founded and conducted regular sociological conferences on research, founded two journals, and established a record of valuable publications. His classic work, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1967/1899), was based on his research into Philadelphia's African American community and stressed the strengths and weaknesses of a community wrestling with overwhelming social problems. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to note that a dual heritage creates conflict for people of color. He called this duality *double-consciousness*—the identity conflict of being both a black and an American. Du Bois pointed out that although people in this country espouse such values as democracy, freedom, and equality, they also accept racism and group discrimination. African Americans are the victims of these conflicting values and the actions that result from them. The influence of Du Bois continues to grow in contemporary studies of inequality, social justice, and the need for change in racial/ethnic and class relations in the United States and worldwide.



Compare and contrast functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, and postmodern perspectives on social life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Theoretical Perspectives in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Given the many and varied ideas and trends that influenced the development of sociology, how do contemporary sociologists view society? Some see it as basically a stable and ongoing entity; others view it in terms of many groups competing for scarce resources; still others describe it based on the everyday, routine interactions among individuals. Each of these views represents a method of examining the same phenomena. Each is based on general ideas about how social life is organized and represents an effort to link specific observations in a meaningful way. Each uses a *theory*—a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events. Each theory helps interpret reality in a distinct way by providing a framework in which observations may be logically ordered. Sociologists refer to this theoretical framework as a *perspective*—an overall approach to or viewpoint on some subject. Three major theoretical perspectives have been predominant in U.S. sociology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the functionalist, conflict,

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theory

a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events.

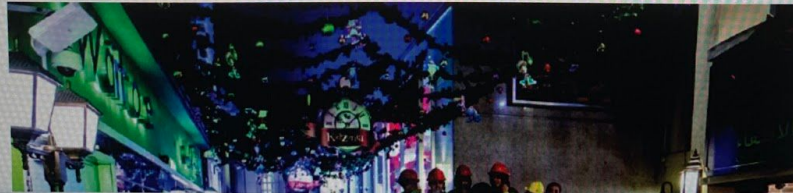
Functionalist Perspectives

Also known as **functionalism** and **structural functionalism**, **functionalist perspectives** are based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system. This stable system is characterized by **societal consensus**, whereby the majority of members share a common set of values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations. According to this perspective, a society is composed of interrelated parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, institutions that persist because they play a part in helping society survive. These institutions include the family, education, government, religion, and the economy. If anything adverse happens to one of these institutions or parts, all other parts are affected, and the system no longer functions properly.

functionalist perspectives

the sociological approach that views society as a stable, orderly system.

FIGURE 1.6 Shopping malls are a reflection of a consumer society. A manifest function of a shopping mall is to sell goods and services to shoppers; however, a latent function may be to provide a communal area in which people can visit friends and enjoy an event.





Talcott Parsons/Getty Images

Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), perhaps the most influential contemporary advocate of the functionalist perspective, stressed that all societies must meet social needs in order to survive. Parsons (1955) suggested, for example, that a division of labor (distinct, specialized functions) between husband and wife is essential for family stability and social order. The husband/father performs the *instrumental tasks*, which involve leadership and decision-making responsibilities in the home and employment outside the home to support the family. The wife/mother is responsible for the *expressive tasks*, including housework, caring for the children, and providing emotional support for the entire family. Parsons believed that other institutions, including school, church, and government, must function to assist the family and that all institutions must work together to preserve the system over time (Parsons, 1955).

Functionalism was refined further by Robert K. Merton (pictured; 1910–2003), who distinguished between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. **Manifest functions** are intended and/or overtly recognized by the participants in a social unit. In contrast, **latent functions** are unintended functions that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants (• Figure 1.6). For example, a manifest function of education is the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next; a latent function is the establishment of social relations and networks. Merton noted that all features of a social system may not be functional at all times; *dysfunctions* are the undesirable consequences of any element of a society. A dysfunction of education in the United States is the perpetuation of gender, racial, and class inequalities. Such dysfunctions may threaten the capacity of a society to adapt and survive.

manifest functions

functions that are intended and/or overtly recognized by the participants in a social unit.

latent functions

unintended functions that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants.

Applying a Functionalist Perspective to Suicide Functionalism emphasizes the importance to a society of shared moral values and strong social bonds. It also highlights the significance of social support from others. When rapid social change or other disruptive conditions occur, moral values may erode, and people may become more uncertain about how to act and about whether or not their life has meaning. Social disruption and war are events that produce such feelings of anomie and suicidal ideation—suicidal thoughts or an unusual preoccupation with suicide.

One study that examined the functions of social support in reducing or preventing suicidal ideation in Air Force personnel during U.S. combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan found that all forms of social support were not equally important in protecting individuals against suicidal thoughts or actions. One form of social support is belonging, or companionship support, where we feel like we belong or fit in with others. Tangible support involves material issues, such as having someone willing to lend money or provide assistance with specific tasks. Appraisal support refers to someone providing useful information that helps us evaluate our situation and provide emotional validation for our thoughts and feelings. Esteem support involves having other people show a concern for our well-being or express confidence in us and our ability to overcome the problems we face. Of these four types of social support, the researchers found that esteem support was the most important factor in whether the Air Force personnel in their study had experienced severe suicidal ideation (Bryan and Hernandez, 2013).

Conflict Perspectives

According to **conflict perspectives**, groups in society are engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources. Conflict may take the form of politics, litigation, negotiations, or family discussions about financial matters. Simmel, Marx, and Weber contributed significantly to this perspective by focusing on the inevitability of clashes between social groups. Today, advocates of the conflict perspective view social life as a continuous power struggle among competing social groups.

conflict perspectives

the sociological approach that views groups in society as engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources.

Max Weber and C. Wright Mills As previously discussed, Karl Marx focused on the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Max Weber recognized the importance of economic conditions in producing inequality and conflict in society, but he added *power* and *prestige* as other sources of inequality. Weber (1968/1922) defined *power* as the ability of a person within a social relationship to carry out his or her own will despite resistance from others, and *prestige* as a positive or negative social estimation of honor (Weber, 1968/1922) (• Figure 1.7).

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), a key figure in the development of contemporary conflict theory, encouraged sociologists to get involved in social reform. Mills encouraged everyone to look beneath everyday events in order to observe the major resource and power inequalities that exist in society. He believed that the most important decisions in the United States are made largely behind the scenes by the *power elite*—a small clique of top corporate, political, and military officials. Mills's power elite theory is discussed in Chapter 13 ("Politics and the Economy in Global Perspective").

The conflict perspective is not one unified theory but one with several branches. One branch is the neo-Marxist approach, which views struggle between the classes as inevitable and as a prime source of social change. A second branch focuses on racial-ethnic inequalities and the continued exploitation of members of some racial-ethnic groups. A third branch is the feminist perspective, which focuses on gender issues.

FIGURE 1.7 As one of the wealthiest and most-beloved entertainers in the world, Oprah Winfrey is an example of Max Weber's concept of *prestige*—a positive estimate of honor.



The Feminist Approach A feminist theoretical approach (or “feminism”) directs attention to women’s experiences and the importance of gender as an element of social structure. This approach is based on a belief in the equality of women and men and the idea that all people should be equally valued and have equal rights. According to feminist theorists, we live in a *patriarchy*, a system in which men dominate women and in which things that are considered to be “male” or “masculine” are more highly valued than those considered to be “female” or “feminine.” The feminist perspective assumes that gender is socially created and that change is essential in order for people to achieve their human potential without limits based on gender. Some feminists argue that women’s subordination can end only after the patriarchal system becomes obsolete. However, feminism is not one single, unified approach; there are several feminist perspectives, which are discussed in Chapter 10 (“Sex, Gender, and Sexuality”).

Applying Conflict Perspectives to Suicide How might we use a conflict approach to explain suicide?

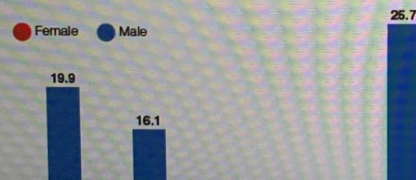
Social Class Although many other factors may be present, social-class pressures may affect rates of suicide among young people from lower-income families when they perceive that they have few educational or employment opportunities and little hope for the future. However, class-based inequality alone cannot explain suicides among young people.

Gender In North America, females are more likely to *attempt* suicide, whereas males are more likely to actually take their own life. Despite the fact that women’s suicidal behavior has traditionally been attributed to problems in their interpersonal relationships, feminist analysts believe that we must examine social structural pressures on young women and how these may contribute to their behavior—for example, cultural assumptions about women and what their multiple roles should be in the family, education, and the workplace.

Race/Ethnicity Racial and ethnic subordination may be a factor in some suicides. (• Figure 1.8 displays U.S. suicides in terms of race and sex.) This fact is most glaringly reflected in the extremely high rate of suicide among Native Americans, who constitute about 1 percent of the U.S. population. On reservations in the northern plains (in states such as North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah), parts of the Southwest, and in Alaska, Native American teens and young adults have suicide rates that are more than three times as high as those for other youths in the United States. Although some research has focused on individualistic reasons why young Native Americans commit suicide, sociologists focus on the effects of social inequalities and racial-ethnic discrimination on suicidal behavior. For example, many Native American young people reside in homes and communities characterized by extreme poverty, hunger, alcoholism, substance abuse, and family violence (Woodard, 2012).

FIGURE 1.8 Suicide Rates by Race and Sex

Rates are for U.S. suicides and indicate the number of deaths by suicide for every 100,000 people by race and sex.



symbolic interactionist perspectives

the sociological approach that views society as the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups.

Symbols are instrumental in helping people derive meanings from social interactions. In social encounters, each person's interpretation or definition of a given situation becomes a *subjective reality* from that person's viewpoint. We often assume that what we consider to be "reality" is shared by others; however, this assumption is often incorrect. Subjective reality is acquired and shared through agreed-upon symbols, especially language. If a person shouts "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater, for example, that language produces the same response (attempting to escape) in all of those who hear and understand it. When people in a group do not share the same meaning for a given symbol, however, confusion results: People who do not know the meaning of the word *fire* will not know what the commotion is about. How people *interpret* the messages they receive and the situations they encounter becomes their subjective reality and may strongly influence their behavior.

Applying Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives to Suicide Social analysts applying a symbolic interactionist framework to the study of suicide focus on a microlevel analysis of the people's face-to-face interactions and the roles they play in society. We define situations according to our own subjective reality. From this point of view, a suicide attempt may be a way of garnering attention—a call for help—rather than wanting to end one's life. People may attempt to communicate in such desperate ways because other forms of communication have failed.

Postmodern Perspectives

According to *postmodern perspectives*, existing theories have been unsuccessful in explaining social life in contemporary societies that are characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communications. Postmodern social theorists reject the theoretical perspectives we have previously discussed, as well as how those theories were created.

postmodern perspectives

the sociological approach that attempts to explain social life in contemporary societies that are characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communication.

Postmodern theories are based on the assumption that large-scale and rapid social change, globalization, and technology are central features in the postmodern era. Moreover, these conditions tend to have a harmful effect on people because they often result in ambiguity and chaos. One evident change is a significant decline in the influence of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education on people's lives. Those who live in postmodern societies typically pursue individual freedom and do not want the structural constraints that are imposed by social institutions. As social inequality and class differences increase, people are exposed to higher levels of stress that produce depression, fear, and ambivalence. Problems such as these are found in nations throughout the world.

Postmodern (or "postindustrial") societies are characterized by an *information explosion* and an economy in which large numbers of people either provide or apply information, or are employed in professional occupations (such as attorneys and physicians) or service jobs (such as fast-food servers and health care workers). There is a corresponding *rise of a consumer society* and the emergence of a *global village* in which people around the world instantly communicate with one another.

Jean Baudrillard, a well-known French social theorist, has extensively explored how the shift from production of goods to consumption of information, services, and products has created a new form of social control. According to Baudrillard's approach, capitalists strive to control people's shopping habits, much like the output of factory workers in industrial economies, to enhance their profits and to keep everyday people from rebelling against social inequality (1998/1970). How does this work? When consumers are encouraged to purchase more than they need or can afford, they often sink deeper in debt and must keep working to meet their monthly payments. Consumption comes to be based on factors such as our "wants" and our need to distinguish ourselves from others. We will return to Baudrillard's general ideas on postmodern societies in Chapter 2 ("Culture").

Postmodern theory opens up broad new avenues of inquiry by challenging existing perspectives and questioning current belief systems. However,

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Postmodern theory opens up broad new avenues of inquiry by challenging existing perspectives and questioning current belief systems. However, postmodern theory has also been criticized for raising more questions than it answers.

Applying Postmodern Perspectives to Suicide Although most postmodern social theorists have not addressed suicide as a social issue, some sociologists believe that postmodern theory can help us because it reminds us that social life is made up of real people with self-identities and lived experiences to share with others. Behind the groups, organizations, classes, and political parties that social scientists study are human beings who participate in the social construction of everyday life.

Looked at from this perspective, the relationship between suicide and race is important to consider. Although youths across ethnic categories share certain risk factors for suicide, young African American and Native American males appear to be at greater risk for suicide because people in this statistical category lack educational and employment opportunities. This problem is combined with other concerns, such as the systemic oppression that persons of color have experienced throughout U.S. history. In other words, the personal biographies of individuals are intertwined with the social worlds that they and others have helped create.

CONCEPT Quick Review 1

The Major Theoretical Perspectives

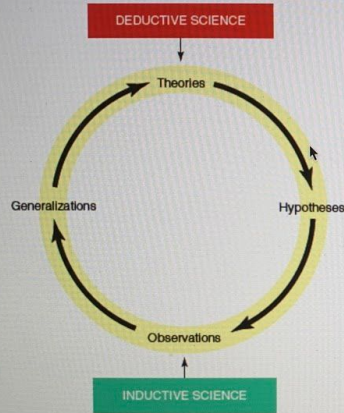
Perspective	Analysis Level	View of Society
Functionalist	Macrolevel	Society is composed of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability within society. This stability is threatened by dysfunctional acts and institutions.
Conflict	Macrolevel	Society is characterized by social inequality; social life is a struggle for scarce resources. Social arrangements benefit some groups at the expense of others.
Symbolic Interactionist	Microlevel	Society is the sum of the interactions of people and groups. Behavior is learned in interaction with other people; how people define a situation becomes the foundation for how they behave.
Postmodernist	Macrolevel/Microlevel	Societies characterized by post-industrialization, consumerism, and global communication bring into question existing assumptions about social life and the nature of reality.

The Sociological Research Process

Most of us rely on our own experiences and personal knowledge to help us form ideas about what happens in everyday life and how the social world works. However, there are many occasions when this personal knowledge is not enough. This is why sociologists and other social scientists learn to question ordinary assumptions and to use specific research methods to find out more about the social world.

FIGURE 1.9 The Theory and Research Cycle

The theory and research cycle can be compared to a relay race; although all participants do not necessarily start or stop at the same point, they share a common goal—to examine all levels of social life.



Research is the process of systematically collecting information for the purpose of testing an existing theory or generating a new one. What is the relationship between sociological theory and research? This relationship has been referred to as a continuous cycle, as shown in • Figure 1.9 (Wallace, 1971).

Not all sociologists conduct research in the same manner. Some researchers primarily engage in quantitative research, whereas others engage in qualitative research. With **quantitative research**, the goal is scientific objectivity, and the focus is on data that can be measured numerically. Quantitative research typically emphasizes complex statistical techniques. Most sociological studies on suicide have used quantitative research. They have compared rates of suicide with almost every conceivable variable, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, and even sports participation. For example, in one quantitative study, researchers found that Latinos/as (Hispanics) consistently had lower suicide rates than whites (non-Hispanics), particularly when they remained strongly attached to others in their own culture. Latinos/as who maintained shared belief systems, rituals, and social networks of friends and relatives that provided them with strong communities and intense feelings of group solidarity were much less likely to commit suicide, much as Durkheim had predicted (Wadsworth and Kubrin, 2007). However, the study also found that just as cultural assimilation (adopting another culture and leaving one's own culture behind) increases the rate of suicide for Hispanics, having higher income and social standing decreases the rate of suicide (Wadsworth and Kubrin, 2007). ^

behind) increases the rate of suicide for Hispanics, having higher income and social standing decreases the rate of suicide (Wadsworth and Kubrin, 2007). In quantitative research, these data are reported in a series of tables that summarize the findings of the researchers. ("Understanding Statistical Data Presentations" explains how to read numerical tables and how to interpret the data and draw conclusions.)

quantitative research

sociological research methods that are based on the goal of scientific objectivity and that focus on data that can be measured numerically.

With *qualitative research*, interpretive descriptions (words) rather than statistics (numbers) are used to analyze underlying meanings and patterns of social relationships. An example of qualitative research is a study in which the researchers systematically analyzed the contents of suicide notes to look for recurring themes (such as feelings of despair or failure) to determine if any patterns could be found that would help in understanding why people kill themselves (Leenaars, 1988).

qualitative research

sociological research methods that use interpretive descriptions (words) rather than statistics (numbers) to analyze underlying meanings and patterns of social relationships.

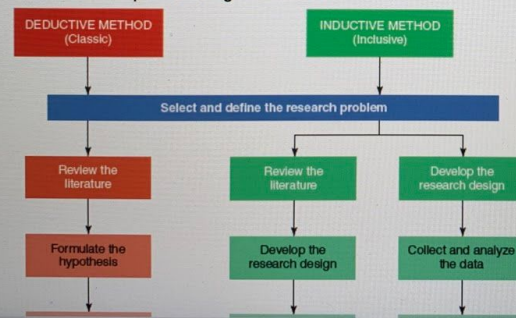


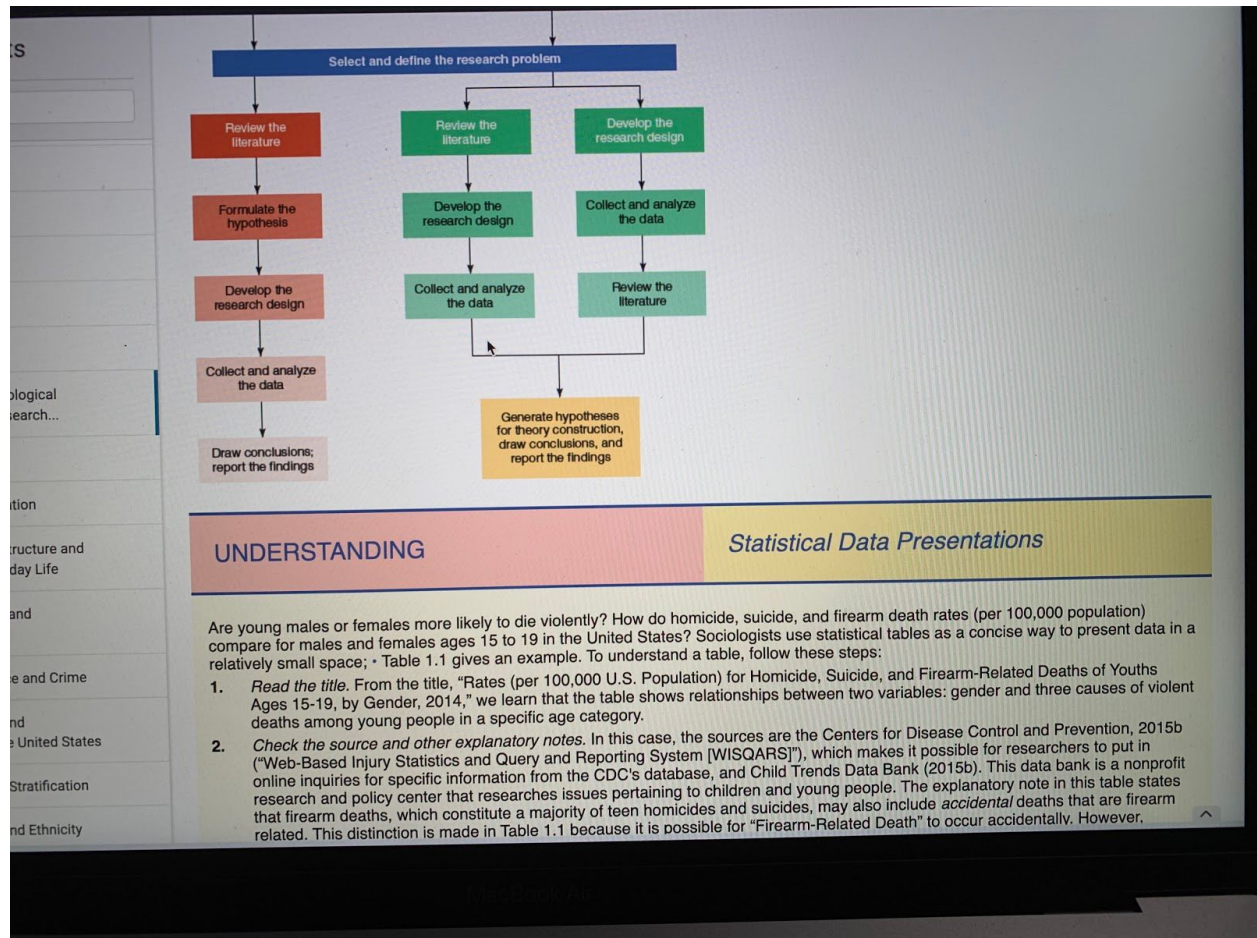
Distinguish between quantitative research and qualitative research, and identify the steps in each method.

The Quantitative Research Model

Research models are tailored to the specific problem being investigated and the focus of the researcher. Both quantitative research and qualitative research contribute to our knowledge of society and human social interaction, and involve a series of steps, as shown in • Figure 1.10. We will now trace the steps in the "conventional" research model, which focuses on quantitative research. Then we will describe an alternative model that emphasizes qualitative research.

FIGURE 1.10 Steps in Sociological Research





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relatively small space; • Table 1.1 gives an example. To understand a table, follow these steps:

1. **Read the title.** From the title, "Rates (per 100,000 U.S. Population) for Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm-Related Deaths of Youths Ages 15-19, by Gender, 2014," we learn that the table shows relationships between two variables: gender and three causes of violent deaths among young people in a specific age category.
2. **Check the source and other explanatory notes.** In this case, the sources are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015b ("Web-Based Injury Statistics and Query and Reporting System [WISQARS]"), which makes it possible for researchers to put in online inquiries for specific information from the CDC's database, and Child Trends Data Bank (2015b). This data bank is a nonprofit research and policy center that researches issues pertaining to children and young people. The explanatory note in this table states that firearm deaths, which constitute a majority of teen homicides and suicides, may also include *accidental* deaths that are firearm related. This distinction is made in Table 1.1 because it is possible for "Firearm-Related Death" to occur accidentally. However, firearms were the method of death in 88 percent of teen homicides and 41 percent of teen suicides in 2014.
3. **Read the headings for each column and each row.** The main column headings in Table 1.1 are "Method," "Males," and "Females." The columns present information (usually numbers) arranged vertically. The rows present information horizontally. Here, the row headings indicate homicide, suicide, and firearm-related death. Based on the explanation above regarding "Firearm-Related Death," we know that some overlap exists between the first two categories—homicide and suicide—and the third, deaths that are firearm related.
4. **Examine and compare the data.** To examine the data, determine what units of measurement have been used. In Table 1.1 the figures are rates per 100,000 males or females in a specific age category. For example, the suicide rate is 13.0 per 100,000 population of males between the ages of 15 and 19 as compared with only 4.2 per 100,000 population of females in the same age category.

TABLE 1.1

Rates (per 100,000 U.S. Population) for Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm-Related Deaths of Youths Ages 15-19, by Gender, 2014

Method	Males	Females
Homicide	11.1	1.9
Suicide	13.0	4.2
Firearm-Related Death ^a	17.2	2.3

^aFirearm deaths, which constitute a majority of teen homicides and suicides, also include accidental deaths that are firearm related. Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015b; and Child Trends Data Bank, 2015b.

5. **Draw conclusions.** By looking for patterns, some conclusions can be drawn from Table 1.1:
 - a. **Determining differences by gender.** Males between the ages of 15 and 19 are about three times more likely than females to die from suicide (13.0 compared with 4.2 per 100,000 in 2014). Males in this age category are about six times more likely to die from homicide (11.1 compared with 1.9 per 100,000). And even more noteworthy, males are about eight times more likely to die from any firearm-related incident (either intentional or unintentional) than females of this age. As shown in Table 1.1, 17.2 per 100,000 males ages 15-19 died by firearms in 2014, compared with 2.3 per 100,000 females in that same age category.
 - b. **Drawing appropriate conclusions.** Males between the ages of 15 and 19 are much more likely than females in their age category to die violently, and many of those deaths are firearm related. Although not indicated in this table, it is important to note that differences by race and Hispanic origin are also significant. In 2014 the homicide rate for African American male teens was 45.6 per 100,000, more than 20 times higher than the rate for white male teens. The highest rate of suicide for males in the 15-19 age category was among Native American males, at 20 per 100,000. For more information, visit the Child Trends Data Bank website.

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Race and Ethnicity

1. **Select and define the research problem.** Sometimes, a specific experience such as knowing someone who committed suicide can trigger your interest in a topic. Other times, you might select topics to fill gaps or challenge misconceptions in existing research or to test a specific theory (Babbie, 2016). Emile Durkheim selected suicide because he wanted to demonstrate the importance of *society* in situations that might appear to be arbitrary acts by individuals. Suicide was a suitable topic because it was widely believed that suicide was a uniquely individualistic act. However, Durkheim emphasized that *suicide rates* provide better explanations for suicide than do *individual* acts of suicide. He reasoned that if suicide were purely an individual act, then the rate of suicide (the number of people who kill themselves in a given year) should be the same for every group regardless of culture and social structure. Moreover, Durkheim wanted to know why there were different rates of suicide—whether factors such as religion, marital status, sex, and age had an effect on social cohesion.
2. **Review previous research.** Before beginning the research, it is important to analyze what others have written about the topic. You should determine where gaps exist and note mistakes to avoid. When Durkheim began his study, very little sociological literature existed to review; however, he studied the works of several moral philosophers, including Henry Morselli (1975/1881).
3. **Formulate the hypothesis** (if applicable). You may formulate a **hypothesis**—a statement of the expected relationship between two or more variables. A **variable** is any concept with measurable traits or characteristics that can change or vary from one person, time, situation, or society to another. The most fundamental relationship in a hypothesis is between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables (see • Figure 1.11). The **independent variable** is presumed to be the cause of the relationship; the **dependent variable** is assumed to be caused by the independent variable(s) (Babbie, 2016). Durkheim's hypothesis stated that the rate of suicide varies *inversely* with the degree of social integration. In other words, a low degree of social integration (the independent variable) may “cause” or “be related to” a high rate of suicide (the dependent variable).

hypothesis

a statement of the expected relationship between two or more variables.

variable

any concept with measurable traits or characteristics that can change or vary from one person, time, situation, or society to another.

Independent variable

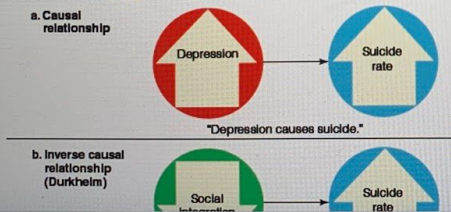
in an experiment, the variable assumed to be the cause of the relationship between variables.

dependent variable

in an experiment, the variable assumed to be caused by the independent variable(s).

FIGURE 1.11 Hypothesized Relationships Between Variables

A causal hypothesis connects one or more independent (causal) variables with a dependent (affected) variable. The diagram illustrates three hypotheses about the causes of suicide. To test these hypotheses, social scientists would need to operationalize the variables (define them in measurable terms) and then investigate whether the data support the proposed explanation.



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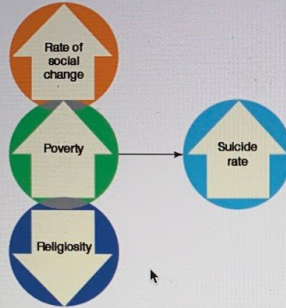
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"The lack of social integration causes suicide."

c. Multiple-cause
explanation



"Many factors interact to cause suicide."

Not all social research uses hypotheses. If you plan to conduct an explanatory study (showing a cause-and-effect relationship), you will likely want to formulate one or more hypotheses to test theories. If you plan to conduct a descriptive study, however, you will be less likely to do so because you may desire only to describe social reality or provide facts.

4. *Develop the research design.* You must determine the unit of analysis to be used in the study. A *unit of analysis* is *what* or *whom* is being studied (Babbie, 2016). In social science research, individuals, social groups (such as families, cities, or geographic regions), organizations (such as clubs, labor unions, or political parties), and social artifacts (such as books, paintings, or weddings) may be units of analysis. As mentioned, Durkheim's unit of analysis was social groups, not individuals.
5. *Collect and analyze the data.* You must decide what population will be observed or questioned and then carefully select a sample. A *sample* is the people who are selected from the population to be studied; the sample should accurately represent the larger population. A *representative sample* is a selection from a larger population that has the essential characteristics of the total population. For example, if you interviewed five students selected haphazardly from your sociology class, they would not be representative of your school's student body. By contrast, if you selected five students from the student body by a random sample, they would be closer to being representative (although a random sample of five students would be too small to yield much useful data).

Validity and reliability may be problems in research. **Validity** is the extent to which a study or research instrument accurately measures what it is supposed to measure. A recurring issue in studies that analyze the relationship between religious beliefs and suicide is whether "church membership" is a valid indicator of a person's religious beliefs. In fact, one person may be very religious yet not belong to a specific church, whereas another person may be a member of a church yet not hold very deep religious beliefs. **Reliability** is the extent to which a study or research instrument yields consistent results when applied to different individuals at one time or to the same individuals over time. Sociologists have found that different interviewers get different answers from the people being interviewed. For example, how might the interviewers themselves influence interviews with college students who have contemplated suicide?

validity

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validity

the extent to which a study or research instrument accurately measures what it is supposed to measure.

reliability

the extent to which a study or research instrument yields consistent results when applied to different individuals at one time or to the same individuals over time.

Once you have collected your data, the data must be analyzed. *Analysis* is the process through which data are organized so that comparisons can be made and conclusions drawn. Sociologists use many techniques to analyze data. For his study of suicide, Durkheim collected data from vital statistics for approximately 26,000 suicides. He classified them separately according to age, sex, marital status, presence or absence of children in the family, religion, geographic location, calendar date, method of suicide, and a number of other variables. As Durkheim analyzed his data, four distinct categories of suicide emerged: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. *Egoistic suicide* occurs among people who are isolated from any social group. For example, Durkheim concluded that suicide rates were relatively high in Protestant countries in Europe because Protestants believed in individualism and were more loosely tied to the church than were Catholics. Single people had proportionately higher suicide rates than married persons because they had a low degree of social integration, which contributed to their loneliness. In contrast, *altruistic suicide* occurs among individuals who are excessively integrated into society. An example is military leaders who kill themselves after defeat in battle because they have so strongly identified themselves with their cause that they believe they cannot live with defeat. Today, other factors such as extended periods of military service or lengthy wars may also contribute to relatively high rates of suicide among U.S. military personnel (see "Sociology and Social Policy"). According to Durkheim, people are more likely to commit suicide when social cohesion is either very weak or very strong, and/or when nations experience rapid social change.

6. *Draw conclusions and report the findings.* After analyzing the data, your first step in drawing conclusions is to return to your hypothesis or research objective to clarify how the data relate both to the hypothesis and to the larger issues being addressed. At this stage, you note the limitations of the study, such as problems with the sample, the influence of variables over which you had no control, or variables that your study was unable to measure.

Reporting the findings is the final stage. The report generally includes a review of each step taken in the research process in order to make the study available for *replication*—the repetition of the investigation in substantially the same way that it was originally conducted. Social scientists generally present their findings in papers at professional meetings and publish them in technical journals and books. In reporting his findings in *Suicide* (1964b/1897), Durkheim concluded that the suicide rate of a group is a social fact that cannot be explained in terms of the personality traits of individuals. Instead, his findings suggested that social conditions in a society are a more significant influence on rates of suicide.

We have traced the steps in the "conventional" research process (based on deduction and quantitative research). But what steps might be taken in an alternative approach based on induction and qualitative research?

A Qualitative Research Model

Although the same underlying logic is involved in both quantitative and qualitative sociological research, the *styles* of these two models are very different. Qualitative research is more likely to be used when the research question does not easily lend itself to numbers and statistical methods. As compared to

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A Qualitative Research Model

Although the same underlying logic is involved in both quantitative and qualitative sociological research, the *styles* of these two models are very different. Qualitative research is more likely to be used when the research question does not easily lend itself to numbers and statistical methods. As compared to a quantitative model, a qualitative approach often involves a different type of research question and a smaller number of cases. Researchers using a qualitative approach may engage in *problem formulation* to clarify the research question and to formulate questions of concern and interest to people participating in the research.

In a qualitative approach, reviewing the literature and developing the research design often happen simultaneously. Typically, the next step is collecting and analyzing data to assess the validity of the starting proposition. Data gathering is the foundation of the research. Researchers pursuing a qualitative approach tend to gather data in natural settings, such as where the person lives or works, rather than in a laboratory or other research setting. Data collection and analysis frequently occur concurrently, and the analysis draws heavily on the language of the persons studied, not the researcher. Additional review of the literature may occur later in the process after data have been gathered and further insights are needed to help describe, explain, or make predictions from the data that have been analyzed. Finally, the researchers draw conclusions from their research and report their findings to others.

How would qualitative research work for the study of suicide? One Canadian study examined suicide among twenty-two older men who had previously experienced depression, and the study found important relationships between societal expectations about masculinity, depression, and suicide (Olfiffe et al., 2011). To find out more about linkages between depression and suicide, researchers interviewed the men to learn more about how cumulative losses had contributed to their depression and lack of desire to live. The loss of social bonds, through deaths of family members and friends, was a major factor in their depression and thoughts about suicide. Other factors that contributed to their depression and suicidal tendencies were feelings that they were a failure as a breadwinner and/or beliefs that they had other shortcomings that their older age prevented them from overcoming. However, the qualitative study revealed that many of the participants would not commit suicide because of the stigma associated with this act and their guilt about the pain this act would bring to their family and friends (Olfiffe et al., 2011).

From qualitative studies such as this one, we learn information that we might not find when using quantitative research. We find answers to questions such as “why” people might or might not engage in a specific behavior. Qualitative and quantitative research methods are often used in combination with each other in a research design to provide a more holistic view of the social world.

Lo8

Describe survey research and briefly discuss three types of surveys.

Research Methods

How do sociologists know which research method to use? Are some approaches best for a particular problem? Research methods are specific strategies ^

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Research Methods

How do sociologists know which research method to use? Are some approaches best for a particular problem? **Research methods** are specific strategies or techniques for systematically conducting research. We will look at four of these methods: survey research, secondary analysis of existing data, field research, and experiments.

research methods

specific strategies or techniques for systematically conducting research.

Survey Research

A **survey** is a poll in which the researcher gathers facts or attempts to determine the relationships among facts. Surveys are the most widely used research method in the social sciences because they make it possible to study things that are not directly observable—such as people's attitudes and beliefs—and to describe a population too large to observe directly (Babbie, 2016) (• Figure 1.12). Researchers frequently select a representative sample from a larger population to answer questions about attitudes, opinions, or behavior. **Respondents** are people who provide data for analysis through interviews or questionnaires. The Gallup and Harris polls are among the most widely known large-scale surveys; however, government agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau conduct a variety of surveys as well.

survey

a poll in which the researcher gathers facts or attempts to determine the relationships among facts.

Unlike many polls that use various methods of gaining a representative sample of the larger population, the Census Bureau attempts to gain information from all persons in the United States. The decennial census occurs every ten years, in the years ending in “0.” The purpose of this census is to count the population and housing units of the entire nation. The population count determines how seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are apportioned; however, census figures are also used in formulating public policy and in planning and decision making in the private sector. The Census Bureau attempts to survey the *entire* U.S. population by using two forms—a “short form” of questions asked of all respondents, and a “long form” that contains additional questions asked of a *representative sample* of about one in six respondents. Statistics from the Census Bureau provide information that sociologists use in their research.

SOCIOLOGY & Social Policy



Establishing Policies to Help Prevent Military Suicides

- **First, the good news:** The number of suicides among active-duty U.S. military troops was down in the first four months of 2015, as compared to the same time period in 2013 and 2014.
- **Now, the bad news:** For all of 2014, a total of 532 personnel killed themselves, including 273 active-duty members. Although overall military suicide rates were down in the first four months of 2015, the U.S. Army had an *increase* in the number of suicides over previous years.

ents

and the executive branch of the U.S. government have encouraged all branches of the military to learn more about the sociological causes of suicide and to develop comprehensive suicide-prevention initiatives to help reduce the problem and support military service members around the globe. A 2012 executive order, "Improving Access to Mental Health for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families," set forth initiatives designed to improve mental health resources and intervention tools, such as increasing the number of crisis lines, peer-to-peer counselors, and mental health professionals available to service members and veterans. More recently, Facebook has become a tool for helping with posttraumatic stress, depression, and mental illness. The Durkheim Project (named for sociologist Emile Durkheim) combines Facebook, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs in an effort to help veterans in distress. Those who voluntarily install an app on their digital devices get help from other military personnel if they post messages containing expressions of hopelessness, sleeplessness, or isolation (see the Durkheim Project website).

Clearly, a variety of sociological issues are central in dealing with suicidal ideation and behavior in the military. In the words of a U.S. Army (2012: 51) report, "Each potential suicide or attempted suicide is different with respect to contributing factors and triggering events. Each victim responds differently to pre-suicide stressors based on protective factors such as personal resilience, coping skills, and whether or not they are help-seeking...."

What unique social conditions do military personnel face that might contribute to suicide or other conditions such as depression and alcoholism?



Studies are being conducted to gain a better understanding of why suicides are happening and what might be done to prevent this pressing problem. Although no single cause can be identified for suicide, factors such as financial worries, relationship issues, legal trouble, substance abuse, medical problems, and posttraumatic stress are all thought to be associated with suicidal behavior among military personnel. Perhaps greater awareness and new social policies being implemented by the military will help reduce this problem in the future.

REFLECT & ANALYZE

How might lengthy deployments away from home contribute to suicidal behavior among troops? Why do some military personnel commit suicide after they return home?

REFLECT & ANALYZE

How might lengthy deployments away from home contribute to suicidal behavior among troops? Why do some military personnel commit suicide after they return home?

Types of Surveys Survey data are collected by using self-administered questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and telephone or computer surveys. A **questionnaire** is a printed research instrument containing a series of items to which subjects respond. Items are often in the form of statements with which the respondent is asked to “agree” or “disagree.” Questionnaires may be administered by interviewers in face-to-face encounters or by telephone, but the most commonly used technique is the *self-administered questionnaire*, which is either mailed to the respondent's home or administered to groups of respondents gathered at the same place at the same time. For example, in a now-classic study of suicide, race, and religion, the sociologist Kevin E. Early (1992) used survey data collected through questionnaires to test his hypothesis that suicide rates are lower among African Americans than among white Americans because of the influence of black churches. Data from questionnaires filled out by members of six African American churches in Florida supported Early's hypothesis that the church buffers some African Americans against harsh social forces—such as racism—that might otherwise lead to suicide.

questionnaire

a printed research instrument containing a series of items to which subjects respond.

Survey data may also be collected by interviews. An **interview** is a data-collection encounter in which an interviewer asks the respondent questions and records the answers. Survey research often uses *structured interviews*, in which the interviewer asks questions from a standardized questionnaire. Structured interviews tend to produce uniform or replicable data that can be elicited time after time by different interviewers. For example, in addition to surveying congregation members, Early (1992) conducted interviews with pastors of African American churches to determine the pastors' opinions about the extent to which African American churches reinforce values and beliefs that discourage suicide.

interview

a data-collection encounter in which an interviewer asks the respondent questions and records the answers.

Interviews have specific advantages such as being more effective in dealing with complicated issues and providing an opportunity for face-to-face communication between the interviewer and the respondent. Although interviews provide a wide variety of useful information, a major disadvantage is the cost and time involved in conducting the interviews and analyzing the results.

A quicker method of administering questionnaires is the *telephone* or *computer survey*. Telephone and computer surveys give greater control over data collection and provide greater personal safety for respondents and researchers than do personal encounters (• Figure 1.13). In *computer-assisted telephone interviewing* (sometimes called CATI), the interviewer uses a computer to dial random telephone numbers, reads the questions shown on the video monitor to the respondent, and then types the responses into the computer terminal. The answers are immediately stored in the central computer, which automatically prepares them for data analysis. However, the respondent must answer the phone before the interview can take place, and many people screen their phone calls. In the past few years, online survey research has increased dramatically as software packages and online survey services have made this type of research easier to conduct. Online research makes it possible to study virtual communities, online relationships, and other types of computer-mediated communications networks around the world.

FIGURE 1.12 Conducting surveys and polls is an important means of gathering data from respondents. Some surveys take place on street corners; increasingly, however, such surveys are done by telephone, Internet, and other means.

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Survey research is useful in describing the characteristics of a large population without having to interview each person in that population. In recent years, computer technology has enhanced researchers' ability to do *multivariate analysis*—research involving more than two independent variables. For example, to assess the influence of religion on suicidal behavior among African Americans, a researcher might look at the effects of age, sex, income level, and other variables all at once to determine which of these independent variables influences suicide the most or least and how influential each variable is relative to the others. However, a weakness of survey research is the use of standardized questions; this approach tends to force respondents into categories in which they may or may not belong. Moreover, survey research relies on self-reported information, and some people may be less than truthful, particularly on emotionally charged issues such as suicide.

Lo9

Compare and contrast research methods used in surveys, secondary analysis of existing data, field research, and experiments.

Secondary Analysis of Existing Data

In *secondary analysis*, researchers use existing material and analyze data that were originally collected by others. Existing data sources include public records, official reports of organizations or government agencies, and *raw data* collected by other researchers. For example, Durkheim used vital statistics (death records) that were originally collected for other purposes to examine the relationship among variables such as age, marital status, and the circumstances surrounding the person's suicide. Today, many researchers studying suicide use data compiled by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. For example, look at • Figure 1.14, “National Suicide Statistics at a Glance,” based on data compiled by the CDC, and try to develop several plausible sociological explanations for why suicide rates are the highest in the western and northwestern regions of the United States. Patterns of high suicide rates are also reported among some counties in the central Midwest, the South, and Central Florida. Can you provide an explanation of why rates might be higher in these areas?

secondary analysis

a research method in which researchers use existing material and analyze data that were originally collected by others.

Secondary analysis also includes *content analysis*—the systematic examination of cultural artifacts or various forms of communication to extract thematic data and draw conclusions about social life. Among the materials studied are written records (such as books, diaries, poems, and graffiti), narratives and visual texts (such as movies, television programs, advertisements, and greeting cards), and material culture (such as music, art, and even garbage). In content analysis, researchers look for regular patterns, such as the frequency of suicide as a topic on television talk shows. They may also examine subject matter to determine how it has been represented, such as how the mass media frame presentations of suicide.

content analysis

the systematic examination of cultural artifacts or various forms of communication to extract thematic data and draw conclusions about social life.

One strength of secondary analysis is that data are readily available and inexpensive. Another is that because the researcher often does not collect the data personally, the chances of bias may be reduced. In addition, the use of existing sources makes it possible to analyze longitudinal data (things that take place over a period of time or at several different points in time) to provide a historical context within which to locate original research. However, secondary analysis has inherent problems. For one thing, the researcher does not always know if the data are incomplete, unauthentic, or inaccurate.

Field Research

Field research is the study of social life in its natural setting: observing and interviewing people where they live, work, and play. Some kinds of behavior can be best studied by “being there”: a fuller understanding can be developed through observations, face-to-face discussions, and participation in events.

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Field Research

Field research is the study of social life in its natural setting: observing and interviewing people where they live, work, and play. Some kinds of behavior can be best studied by “being there”; a fuller understanding can be developed through observations, face-to-face discussions, and participation in events. Researchers use these methods to generate qualitative data: observations that are best described verbally rather than numerically.

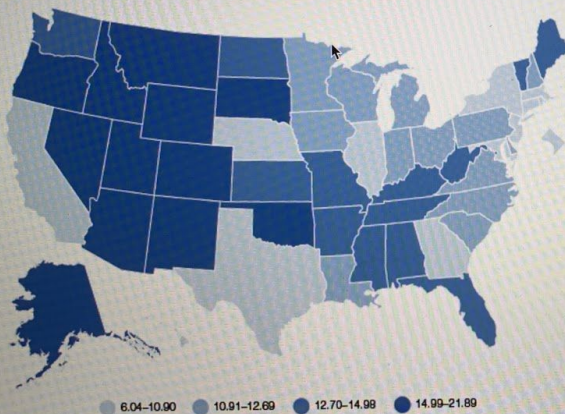
Sociologists who are interested in observing social interaction as it occurs may use **participant observation**—the process of collecting systematic observations while being part of the activities of the group that the researcher is studying. Participant observation generates more “inside” information than simply asking questions or observing from the outside. For example, to learn more about how coroners make a ruling of “suicide” in connection with a death and to analyze what (if any) effect such a ruling has on the accuracy of “official” suicide statistics, the sociologist Steve Taylor (1982) engaged in participant observation at a coroner’s office over a six-month period. As he followed a number of cases from the initial report of death through the various stages of investigation, Taylor learned that it was important to “be around” so that he could listen to discussions and ask the coroners questions because intuition and guesswork play a large part in some decisions to rule a death as a suicide.

participant observation

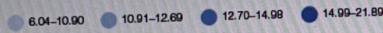
a research method in which researchers collect systematic observations while being part of the activities of the group being studied.

FIGURE 1.14 National Suicide Statistics at a Glance

Suicide rate per 100,000 population by state for all races and ethnicities, both sexes, and all ages, 2004–2010, United States.



Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC Data Sources, 2015.



Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC Data Sources, 2015.

Another approach to field research is **ethnography**—a detailed study of the life and activities of a group of people by researchers who may live with that group over a period of years. Unlike participant observation, ethnographic studies usually take place over a longer period of time. For example, the sociologist Alice Goffman (2014) spent six years living in a high-crime, drug-ridden Philadelphia neighborhood before writing her book *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (• Figure 1.15 and • Figure 1.16). She interviewed a wide array of people, including many young African American men who had been caught up in a web of drug dealing and surveillance by law enforcement officers. Based on her extensive ethnographic research, Goffman was able to describe in great detail how generations of young men had been sacrificed in the drug war and how the blighting of neighborhoods contributed to the problems of young people who had few opportunities for the future. It is important to note that Goffman's work received not only extensive media coverage and praise from some reviewers but also criticism from others who believed that she had exploited her subjects, that she had possibly run afoul of the law in some activities with her research subjects, and that there were ethical issues with her overall research (Lewis-Kraus, 2016).

ethnography
a detailed study of the life and activities of a group of people by researchers who may live with that group over a period of years.

Experiments

An **experiment** is a carefully designed situation in which the researcher studies the impact of certain variables on subjects' attitudes or behavior. Experiments are designed to create "real-life" situations, ideally under controlled circumstances, in which the influence of different variables can be modified and measured. Conventional experiments require that subjects be divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The **experimental group** contains the subjects who are exposed to an independent variable (the experimental condition) to study its effect on them. The **control group** contains the subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable. For example, the sociologist Arturo Biblarz and colleagues (1991) examined the effects of media violence and depictions of suicide on attitudes toward suicide by showing one group of subjects (an experimental group) a film about suicide, while a second (another experimental group) saw a film about violence, and a third (the control group) saw a film containing neither suicide nor violence. The research found some evidence that people exposed to suicidal acts or violence in the media may be more likely to demonstrate an emotional state favorable to suicidal behavior, particularly if they are already "at risk" for suicide. If we were able to replicate this study today, do you believe that we would find similar results? Why or why not?

experiment
a carefully designed situation in which the researcher studies the impact of certain variables on subjects' attitudes or behavior.

experimental group
the group that contains the subjects who are exposed to an independent variable (the experimental condition) to study its effect on them.

control group
the group that contains the subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable.

Researchers may use experiments when they want to demonstrate that a cause-and-effect relationship exists between variables, such as whether violent video games cause an increase in violent tendencies in people who use them (• Figure 1.17). In order to show that a change in one variable causes a change in another, three conditions must be satisfied: (1) a correlation between the two variables must be shown to exist (**correlation** exists when two variables

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control group
the group that contains the subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable.

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correlation
a relationship that exists when two variables are associated more frequently than could be expected by chance.

The major advantage of an experiment is the researcher's control over the environment and the ability to isolate the experimental variable. Because many experiments require relatively little time and money and can be conducted with limited numbers of subjects, it is possible for researchers to replicate an experiment several times by using different groups of subjects (Babbie, 2016). Perhaps the greatest limitation of experiments is that they are artificial: Social processes that are set up by researchers or that take place in a laboratory setting are often not the same as real-life occurrences (see Concept Quick Review 2).

FIGURE 1.15 Alice Goffman

