Chapter 2

Sociological Investigation

I. The Basics of Sociological Investigation.
   A. Sociological investigation begins with two key requirements:
      1. Apply the sociological perspective.
      2. Be curious and ask questions.
   B. Sociology is a type of science, a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation. Science is one form of truth. Scientific knowledge is based on empirical evidence, or information we can verify with our senses.
   C. Scientific evidence sometimes contradicts common sense explanations of social behavior.
      1. SOCIOLOGY IN FOCUS BOX (p. 28)—Is What We Read in the Popular Press True? The Case of Extramarital Sex.
         Every day, we see stories in newspapers and magazines that tell us what people think and how they behave. But a lot of what we read turns out to be misleading or even untrue. Take the issue of extramarital sex, which refers to a married person having sex with someone other than his or her spouse. A look at the cover of many of the so-called women’s magazines you find in the checkout aisle at the supermarket or a quick reading of the advice column in your local newspaper might lead you to think that extramarital sex is a major issue facing married couples.

II. Three Ways to Do Sociology.
   There are three ways to do research in sociology: positivist sociology, interpretive sociology, and critical sociology.
   A. Positivist Sociology.
      1. Scientific sociology is the study of society based on systematic observation of social behavior. The scientific orientation to knowing, called positivism, assumes that an objective reality exists.
      2. Concepts are mental constructs that represent some part of the world, inevitably in a simplified form.
      3. Variables are concepts whose value changes from case to case.
      4. Measurement is the procedure for determining the value of a variable in a specific case.
         a. Statistical measures are frequently used to describe populations as a whole.
         b. This requires that researchers operationalize variables, which means specifying exactly what is to be measured before assigning a value to a variable.
5. SEEING SOCIOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE BOX (p. 30)—Three Useful (and Simple) Descriptive Statistics.
   a. The **mode** is the value that occurs most often in a series of numbers.
   b. The **mean** refers to the arithmetic average of a series of numbers.
   c. The **median** is the value that occurs midway in a series of numbers arranged from lowest to highest

6. For a measurement to be useful, it must be reliable and valid.
   a. **Reliability** refers to consistency in measurement.
   b. **Validity** means precision in measuring exactly what one intends to measure.

7. Relationships among variables.
   a. **Cause and effect** is a relationship in which change in one variable causes change in another.
      i. The **independent variable** is the variable that causes the change.
      ii. The **dependent variable** is the variable that changes.
   b. Cause-and-effect relationships allow us to predict how one pattern of behavior will produce another.
   c. **Correlation** exists when two (or more) variables change together.
      i. **Spurious correlation** means an apparent, although false, association between two (or more) variables caused by some other variable.
      ii. Spurious correlations can be discovered through scientific **control**, the ability to neutralize the effect of one variable in order to assess relationships among other variables.

8. Sociologists strive for **objectivity**, personal neutrality in conducting research, whenever possible, following Max Weber’s model of value-free research.
   a. One way to limit distortion caused by personal values is through **replication**, or repetition of research by others in order to assess its accuracy.

9. Some limitations of scientific sociology:
   a. Human behavior is too complex to allow sociologists to predict precisely any individual’s actions.
   b. Because humans respond to their surroundings, the mere presence of a researcher may affect the behavior being studied.
   c. Social patterns change; what is true in one time or place may not hold true in another.
   d. Because sociologists are part of the social world they study, being value-free when conducting social research is difficult.

B. Interpretive Sociology.
   1. Max Weber, who pioneered this framework, argued that the focus of sociology is interpretation. **Interpretive sociology** is the study of society that focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world.
   2. The interpretive sociologist’s job is not just to observe what people do but to share in their world of meaning and come to appreciate why they act as they do.
C. Critical Sociology.
   1. Karl Marx, who founded critical sociology, rejected the idea that society exists as a “natural” system with a fixed order. Critical sociology is the study of society that focuses on the need for social change.
   2. The point is not merely to study the world as it is, but to change it.

III. Research Orientations and Theory.
   A. Is there a link between research orientations and sociological theory?
      1. The positivist orientation and the structural-functional approach are both concerned with understanding society as it is.
      2. Interpretive sociology and the symbolic-interaction approach focus on the meanings people attach to their social world.
      3. Critical sociology and the social-conflict approach both seek to reduce social inequality.
   B. SUMMING UP TABLE (p. 34)—provides a quick review of the differences among the three research orientations.

IV. Gender and Research.
   A. Research is affected by gender, the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female and male, in five ways:
      1. Androcentricity, or approaching an issue from the male perspective only.
      2. Overgeneralizing, or using data drawn from studying only one sex to support conclusions about human behavior in general.
      3. Gender blindness, or not considering the variable of gender at all.
      4. Double standards.
      5. Interference because a subject reacts to the sex of the researcher.
   B. The American Sociological Association has established formal guidelines for conducting research.

V. Research Ethics.
   A. Like all researchers, sociologists must be aware that research can harm as well as help subjects or communities. For this reason, the American Sociological Association (ASA)—the major professional association of sociologists in North America—has established formal guidelines for conducting research (1997).

VI. Methods of Sociological Research.
   A research method is a systematic plan for conducting research. Four commonly used research methods are:
   A. An experiment is a research method for investigating cause and effect under highly controlled conditions. Experimental research is explanatory, meaning that it asks not just what happens but why. Typically, researchers conduct experiments to test hypotheses, unverified statements of a relationship between variables. Most experiments are conducted in laboratories and employ experimental and control groups.
1. THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER BOX (p. 36)—Studying the Lives of Hispanics. Gerardo and Barbara Marin (1991) have identified five areas of concern in conducting research with Hispanics:
   a. Be careful with terms.
   b. Realize that cultural values may differ.
   c. Realize that family dynamics may vary.
   d. Be aware that attitudes toward time and efficiency may vary.
   e. Realize that attitudes toward personal space may vary.

2. The Hawthorne effect is a change in a subject's behavior caused by the awareness of being studied.

3. The Stanford County Prison study was an experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo (1972) that supported the notion that the character of prison itself, and not the personalities of prisoners and guards, causes prison violence.

B. A survey is a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions in a questionnaire or an interview. Survey research is usually descriptive rather than explanatory.

1. Surveys are directed at populations, the people who are the focus of research. Usually we study a sample, a part of a population that represents the whole. Random sampling is commonly used to be sure that the sample is actually representative of the entire population.

2. Surveys may involve questionnaires, a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects. Questionnaires may be closed-ended or open-ended. Most surveys are self-administered and must be carefully pretested.

3. Surveys may also take the form of interviews, a series of questions administered in person by a researcher to respondents.

4. THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY: RACE, CLASS, & GENDER BOX (p. 40)—Using Tables in Research: Analyzing Benjamin’s African American Elite. A table provides a lot of information in a small amount of space, so learning to read tables can increase your reading efficiency.
   a. Lois Benjamin (1991) used interviews and snowball sampling to study one hundred elite African Americans. Benjamin concluded that, despite the improving social standing of African Americans, Blacks in the United States still experience racial hostility.

C. Participant observation is a method by which researchers systematically observe people while joining in their routine activities. Participant observation research is descriptive and often exploratory. It is normally qualitative research, inquiry based on subjective impressions.

1. William Whyte (1943) utilized this approach to study social life in a poor neighborhood in Boston. His research, published in the book Street Corner Society, illustrates the value of using a key informant in field research.
D. Using available data: Existing sources.
   1. Sometimes, sociologists analyze existing sources, data collection by others.
   2. E. Digby Baltzell’s (1979b) *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia* explored reasons for the prominence of New Englanders in national life. This study exemplifies a researcher’s power to analyze the past using historical sources.

VII. The Interplay of Theory and Method.
   A. **Inductive logical thought** is *reasoning that builds specific observations into general theory*.
   B. **Deductive logical thought** is *reasoning that transforms general ideas into specific hypotheses suitable for scientific testing*.
   C. Most sociological research uses both types of logical thought.

**CONTROVERSY & DEBATE BOX**—Can People Lie with Statistics? (pp. 46-47)
   The best way not to fall prey to statistical manipulation is to understand how people can mislead with statistics:
   1. People select their data, choosing what variables to display, the time frame, and the scale of the measurement.
   2. People interpret their data.
   3. People use graphs to “spin” the truth.

VIII. Putting It All Together: Ten Steps in Sociological Investigation:
   A. What is your topic?
   B. What have others already learned?
   C. What, exactly, are your questions?
   D. What will you need to carry out research?
   E. Are there ethical concerns?
   F. What method will you use?
   G. How will you record the data?
   H. What do the data tell you?
   I. What are your conclusions?
   J. How can you share what you’ve learned?