Chapter Activities

# Chapter 2: Examining the Social World: How Do We Know?

## Delving Into Journal Articles

**Objective:** To help students better understand the process of research and research methods.

**Directions:** Select two easy-to-read journal articles (preferably one qualitative and one quantitative) and have students read one of the two articles before class. Break students into small groups, ensuring that all group members have read the same article (qualitative or quantitative). Students should discuss the following issues:

1. What theory did these authors use?

2. What were the authors’ hypotheses?

3. Was the research deductive or inductive?

4. Which variables were used in the study?

5. How were the variables operationalized?

6. What kind of relationship exists between the variables? (correlation, cause and effect, or spurious)

7. What method did the researchers use? (survey, field study, experiment, existing sources, or triangulation)

8. Who composed the sample? Was it representative?

## Applying Theory to Life

**Objective:** To give students a better understanding of how sociological theories can be applied to real life.

**Directions:** Assign students (either in groups or individually) one of the early sociologists. Send them to the library for a class period to gather information on that theorist and his or her work (or, if you can use your laptops in the classroom as an option). Have the students present this information to the class. Then (as a class, in groups, or individually) ask students to apply these classical theories to issues in contemporary society. Follow this with a discussion of the usefulness of these theories today.

## Creating Our Own Study

**Objective:** To help students better understand the process of research and research methods.

**Directions:** Guide the class through the research process including Steps 1 through 8 above. Have them choose a research topic and develop a theory and hypothesis, operationalize variables, and choose the most appropriate method to investigate their topic. If desired, this would be an opportune time to supplement the text with a discussion of designing good survey or interview questions. *Alternative:* When guiding the students through this process, choose the topic yourself (such as “How do college students feel about the fairness of the no-smoking policy on campus?”). Ensure that the topic and methods are something the students could actually carry out themselves in a mini-project (e.g., design a questionnaire and administer it to 50 students). Students could actually complete this project and hand it in for extra credit if desired.

## “You Can Make Statistics Say Anything”

**Objectives:** To counter the common argument that “you can make statistics say anything” while also teaching students about what the popular media can do to sociological research.

**Directions:** Bring in (or have students bring in) several media “snippets” of research (polls from a newspaper or short press releases). Then instruct students to compare the popular press reports to the original sources. Discuss how the two are different and the reasons they differ. Explain some of the precautions sociologists take in order to ensure that their original research is as accurate as possible.

## Locating a Representative Sample

**Objective:** To show students the process that researchers go through in order to find representative samples for their studies.

**Directions:** Tell students that today, they will be locating a representative sample for a study on how people feel about having a new cultural festival on campus. Using the Internet (or PowerPoints you print off before class), show students four different possible groups from which to sample: one group should be all of the students on your campus (you should be able to get this information from your college’s Student Affairs or Diversity Center), one group should be all of the individuals in your college’s county, one from your college’s city, and one from your state (you can locate information for all three at http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/). Have students point out the similarities and differences among the four populations. Further, ask them to debate which would be the most effective group from which to sample and why.

## Research Ethics

**Objective:** To show students that a variety of anticipated and unanticipated ethical issues can occur in the course of research using real scenarios.

**Directions:** Below are a number of scenarios that have emerged during the course of actual social science research. Divide students into five groups and distribute one handout to each group. Have the students read through the scenarios and discuss the questions with their group. Then bring the entire class together again to share their scenarios and proposed courses of action with one another. You can use this exercise as a springboard for discussing research ethics and the reasons for the emergence of IRBs.

### A.

**Research Methods and Ethics Activity**

Imagine that you are a student who wants to write a sociological paper. While conducting your research, you run into the following ethical situation. Discuss as a group what you would do in the scenario and some of the consequences you see for continuing with or abandoning your research.

**Your Topic:** You are interested in how social norms (or rules that guide social behavior) emerge for gang members. You want to know specifically how gang members justify behavior that is not accepted in the larger society as a whole.

**Your Methodological Approach:** You decide that you need to be viewed as a member of the gang and see the process through which different gang activities get assimilated into your gang membership.

**Your Ethical Dilemma:** You are most interested in how certain activities that most members of society see as immoral (like drive-by shootings, beatings, and drug use) become normalized in the gang that you are researching. As a member of this gang, you are expected to participate in these activities.

**Discussion Questions for Your Group**

1. Do you conduct this research despite the potential to act in ways that you view as unethical? Or do you stop the research when you find that potentially damaging effects can occur? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are there to understanding the social processes that you are researching? Do they outweigh the behavior you find unethical?
3. What ethical issues does your group see raised by this particular line of research?

### B.

**Research Methods and Ethics Activity**

Imagine that you are a student who wants to write a sociological paper. While conducting your research, you run into the following ethical situation. Discuss as a group what you would do in the scenario and some of the consequences you see for continuing with or abandoning your research.

**Your Topic:** You are interested in how social norms (or rules that guide social behavior) emerge for persons that engage in casual sex. You have heard rumors of casual sexual activities taking place at rest area bathrooms (called “tearooms”) and would like to know how this exchange is made between unacquainted participants.

**Your Methodological Approach:** You decide that you need to go to rest area bathrooms and see if these tearooms exist. You also want to find out the social roles the participants in these tearooms engage in.

**Your Ethical Dilemma:** While conducting your research, you become interested in how the people who frequent tearooms learn about their existence. You also begin to question issues of sexuality and would like to know what sexual identity these participants assume in their everyday lives. To do this, though, you would have to break confidentiality and reveal to your subjects that you are a researcher.

**Discussion Questions for Your Group**

1. Do you conduct this research despite the potential to act in ways that you view as unethical? Or do you stop the research when you find that potentially damaging effects can occur? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are there to understanding the social processes that you are researching? Do they outweigh the behavior you find unethical?
3. What ethical issues do your group members see raised by this particular line of research?

### C.

**Research Methods and Ethics Activity**

Imagine that you are a student who wants to write a sociological paper. While conducting your research, you run into the following ethical situation. Discuss as a group what you would do in the scenario and some of the consequences you see for continuing with or abandoning your research.

**Your Topic:** You are interested in the effect of power on how people assume social roles. You are specifically wondering if people with power in a social situation behave differently than people without power in the same situation.

**Your Methodological Approach:** You decide to conduct an experiment in which you randomly assign participants as “prisoners” or “guards” in a mock-prison environment that you have set up. You then ask them to role play their assignment to see if even falsely earned (or falsely removed) power affects their behaviors.

**Your Ethical Dilemma:** While conducting your research, you find that the participants get very involved in their role playing. Although you planned for the research to continue for 14 days, you fear that the participants’ view of reality is becoming very blurred, and many are identifying with the roles that they have been assigned.

**Discussion Questions for Your Group**

1. Do you conduct this research despite the potential to act in ways that you view as unethical? Or do you stop the research when you find that potentially damaging effects can occur? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are there to understanding the social processes that you are researching? Do they outweigh the behavior you find unethical?
3. What ethical issues do your group members see raised by this particular line of research?

### D.

**Research Methods and Ethics Activity**

Imagine that you are a student who wants to write a sociological paper. While conducting your research, you run into the following ethical situation. Discuss as a group what you would do in the scenario and some of the consequences you see for continuing with or abandoning your research.

**Your Topic:** You are interested in the extent to which authority affects personal behavior. Based on your interest in Nazi Germany, you question the extent to which a person will do something simply because they are told to do it.

**Your Methodological Approach:** You decide to conduct an experiment in which you randomly assign participants as “teachers” or “students” in a mock-classroom environment that you have set up. For your participants that are teachers, you tell them that electrical shocks help motivate people to learn. Thus, for each question the student gets incorrect, the teacher must administer an electrical shock. Based on the instructions given to the teacher, the electrical shock also must be increased with each wrong answer given by the student.

**Your Ethical Dilemma:** While conducting your research, you find that the participants get very involved in their role playing. Many of the teachers are taking the electric shocks to near-fatal levels.

**Discussion Questions for Your Group**

1. Do you conduct this research despite the potential to act in ways that you view as unethical? Or do you stop the research when you find that potentially damaging effects can occur? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are there to understanding the social processes that you are researching? Do they outweigh the behavior you find unethical?
3. What ethical issues do your group members see raised by this particular line of research?

### E.

**Research Methods and Ethics Activity**

Imagine that you are a student who wants to write a sociological paper. While conducting your research, you run into the following ethical situation. Discuss as a group what you would do in the scenario and some of the consequences you see for continuing with or abandoning your research.

**Your Topic:** You become friends with people who you later find out are drug smugglers. You are interested in how social norms (or rules that guide social behavior) emerge for drug smugglers. You want to know specifically how drug smugglers justify behavior that is not accepted in the larger society as a whole.

**Your Methodological Approach:** You interview your friends and ask them to introduce you to other members of the drug-trafficking community. You become socially involved in their world to understand how they came to participate in such a deviant lifestyle.

**Your Ethical Dilemma:** Your subjects are not only conducting behavior that would be viewed as unethical to the majority of the population but is also considered illegal by your local and federal governments. Also, because you first befriended these people, they have the expectation that you will make readers of your dissertation sympathetic to their lifestyle and different decisions that they make on account of their occupation.

**Discussion Questions for Your Group**

1. Do you conduct this research despite the potential to act in ways that you view as unethical? Or do you stop the research when you find that potentially damaging effects can occur? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are there to understanding the social processes that you are researching? Do they outweigh the behavior you find unethical?
3. What ethical issues do your group members see raised by this particular line of research?