



The Art and Science of Social Research

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Preface

Doing sociological research requires a deep understanding of the steps and mechanics of the scientific process, such as selecting a research topic, developing a theoretical framework, setting forth hypotheses, operationalizing key concepts, and designing a study that can convincingly and rigorously answer compelling questions. Yet social science research is also an art; human beings are not as predictable as molecules. As a result, strict and formulaic adherence to the classic scientific method is not always the best (or most realistic) approach.

In *The Art and Science of Social Research*, a team of internationally renowned sociologists—experts in surveys, experiments, evaluation research, in-depth interviewing, ethnography, materials-based methods, and social network analysis—introduce students to the core concepts and procedures of social science research. The authors also share insights into how sociologists uphold methodological rigor while also realistically addressing the challenges that arise when investigating the unpredictable topic of social behavior. Our hope is that readers will become captivated by social research methods and will be inspired to carry out original research of their own, or will become savvy and thoughtful consumers of research studies carried out by others. In this era of information overload, when dozens of studies about health, self-esteem, dating behavior, political attitudes, unemployment trends, and climate change fly across our radar (or smartphone screen) on a daily basis, it is more important than ever to understand what research findings mean, how they were discovered, and whether we should believe them.

How the First Edition of *The Art and Science of Social Research* Was Born

This book was conceived roughly a decade ago. I was having a working lunch with my then-editor Karl Bakeman (now editorial director for digital media), to discuss our latest ideas for updating my co-authored textbook *Introduction to Sociology* (Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, and Carr, 2018), also published by W. W. Norton. Our conversation turned to the topic of research methods, and we talked animatedly about how wonderful it would be for students to learn not just the “nuts and bolts” of social research and abstract rules like the scientific method, but to also learn about the ways that research is *really* done. We wanted to share real-life insights into the challenges, surprises, and, yes, even mistakes, that researchers encounter when carrying out their work. We wanted to show that researchers can re-strategize, change course, and innovate to carry out compelling, rigorous, and influential scholarship—even when things don’t go as originally planned.

Karl then asked, “Who would be the best person to write this kind of book? Is there a sociologist who is known for being ‘the best’ methodologist?” I thought for a moment and replied that there was not a single person who would be “best” because sociologists

tend to specialize in different methods. Even though nearly all professional sociologists have a general knowledge of surveys, fieldwork, experiments, and so on, often based on our graduate training and the books we read, we have deep and hard-won knowledge only of those methods that we use day in and day out in our own research. Wouldn't it be an amazing educational experience for students to learn about experiments from someone like Shelley Correll, who is internationally recognized for her path-breaking and policy-shaping experimental research showing why working mothers suffer a wage penalty in the labor market? Or qualitative methods from a world-renowned scholar like Mary Waters, who has authored 11 influential books, including the classic *Ethnic Options* (1990), which vividly revealed how European Americans think and talk about ethnicity? We continued to talk about some of the nation's leading sociologists who were doing high-impact research that exemplified what different research methods can (and cannot) do.

To cut to the chase, W. W. Norton agreed to support the publication of such a book. I was delighted when each and every person on my "dream team" of scholars agreed to write about a particular set of research methods and concepts. What's remarkable is that all of the authors not only shared my vision for the book, but also knew exactly how to clearly and vividly convey their ideas, experiences, and expansive knowledge of research methods, gleaned from teaching and mentoring their own undergraduate and graduate students. Although the book technically was authored by seven individuals, it shares one unified voice.

Shelley Correll (Stanford University) authored the chapters on experimental and evaluation research, while Mary Waters (Harvard University) wrote about ethics, in-depth interviewing, ethnography, and analysis of qualitative data. Elizabeth (Liz) Heger Boyle (University of Minnesota) is widely known for her research on laws and legal systems across history and social contexts, including the regulation of abortion, female genital cutting, and nuclear power. Her research methods are unified by her innovative use of materials, including public and historical records, legal documents, media, and secondary data sets. Her passion for historical and comparative research led her to create IPUMS-Demographic and Health Surveys, an online system that unlocks access to critically important data on women and children's health for all researchers around the world. Liz conveys her deep knowledge and experience in her chapter on materials-based methods.

Benjamin (Ben) Cornwell (Cornell University), one of the nation's leading scholars and teachers of social network methods, has written a clear and engaging chapter on this rapidly evolving approach, making *The Art and Science of Social Research* one of (if not the only) undergraduate methods textbooks with an entire chapter dedicated to network data and analysis. Ben has creatively applied network methods to such intriguing topics as drug sales and risky sexual practices. His expertise in designing and collecting social network data for the large National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), as well as analyzing social network data, makes him the ideal author.

Robert (Rob) Crosnoe (University of Texas at Austin) is a rare and prolific scholar who has used both qualitative and quantitative methods to study the lives of adolescents, and the ways that schools, parents, and peers shape one's health, well-being, and future opportunities. He has not only conducted in-depth interviews with American

youth, but also serves as a co-investigator of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Rob has written our foundational chapters focused on theory, concepts, reliability, validity, and other critical building blocks of social research.

Jeremy Freese (Stanford University) is an innovative methodologist who creatively applies statistical methods to both core and cutting-edge questions in sociology, including social inequalities in health and gene-environment interactions. Jeremy also is a leader in developing new data resources and building on existing ones, in his roles as principal investigator on the Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) and the General Social Survey (GSS). He has written chapters on some of the most difficult topics in research methods, including sampling and quantitative data analysis, with clarity, insight, and even good humor.

I drew on my experiences as a long-time instructor of introduction to sociology when writing the book's opening chapter, which provides a brief overview of the field of sociology. And in the survey research chapter, I share my experiences and insights as a co-investigator on large surveys such as the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) and Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) and principal investigator of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). One of my personal passions is writing about social science, whether in academic journals read by professional sociologists, textbooks read by students, or blogs and trade books read by anyone who is curious about human lives. My experiences as an editor, author, and reader have taught me tricks of the trade, which I share in the final chapter on communicating research results.

Major Themes

Three overarching themes run throughout our book. First, as our title conveys, we believe that *social research is both an art and a science*. Good social science rests on foundations like objectivity, rigorous design, and careful adherence to scientific procedures, but it also requires creativity, thoughtful interpretation, nimble problem-solving, a critical eye (often cast on our own work), and the recognition that human beings often are not rational and predictable creatures.

Second, we firmly believe that *no single method is "best."* Rather, each is ideally suited for addressing different types of research goals, with some topics requiring multiple methods to answer a researcher's questions most effectively. We describe the strengths and limitations, possibilities and pitfalls of each method so that readers can make informed decisions when designing their own work.

Third, we convey that *a solid grasp of social research methods is critical for both producing and consuming knowledge*. The skills one learns in the course can help in myriad professions—from market research, to business, to law, to medicine, to education. Just as importantly, a solid knowledge of research methods is critical to being an informed citizen who can examine, challenge, and make sense of the countless research soundbites we encounter every day. How do we know to heed a newscaster's warning that "doing more than two hours of Facebook a day may make you depressed" or "eating breakfast can raise your school grades"? Understanding key concepts such as causal ordering and social selection and knowing how to scrutinize the nuts and bolts of research studies can help us make wise and well-informed decisions.

Organization

The book's 17 chapters are arranged in three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–3) focuses on conceptual issues in social science research. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the types of puzzles investigated by sociologists and the philosophies and goals underlying social research. Chapter 2 describes what theory is, how theory is used in the research process, and the different theoretical frameworks that sociologists draw on to motivate their research questions. Chapter 3 describes the hallmarks of ethical research practices, highlights some of the most infamous examples of unethical research, and explains how these cases informed the creation of explicit rules and guidelines for ethical research.

Part 2 (Chapters 4–6) focuses on what we refer to as the building blocks of empirical social science research: hypotheses, measurement, reliability, validity, and sampling. Chapter 4 describes how researchers develop and test hypotheses, and underscores the importance of measurement when testing theory. Chapter 5 characterizes two of the main criteria used when evaluating the quality and rigor of a study: reliability and validity. Chapter 6 describes sampling strategies, the strengths and weaknesses of these different sampling approaches, and practical strategies for mitigating against those weaknesses.

Part 3 (Chapters 7–13) arguably contains the most exciting material in this book, showcasing the strengths, limitations, and applications of seven research approaches: survey research (Chapter 7), experimental research (Chapter 8), evaluation and translational research (Chapter 9), ethnography (Chapter 10), in-depth interviewing (Chapter 11), materials-based methods, including historical-comparative methods, content analysis, and secondary data analysis (Chapter 12), and social network analysis (Chapter 13).

The final section, Part 4 (Chapters 14–17), provides practical guidance for analyzing and presenting results from one's research. Chapters 14 and 15 focus on the analysis of quantitative data; Chapter 14 covers descriptive and bivariate analyses, and Chapter 15 focuses on more advanced multivariate methods. Chapter 16 provides a step-by-step guide for analyzing qualitative data, including data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation research, and focus groups. Chapter 17 provides tips on communicating social science research results to diverse audiences.

Pedagogical Goals and Tools

Our pedagogical features were designed with several goals in mind: *clarifying key concepts* through repetition, marginal definitions of key terms, Concept Check questions, and end-of-chapter summaries; *sparkling student enthusiasm for research* and an appreciation of the ways that research methods can be applied to contemporary social questions through active-learning exercises, vivid visual examples of research documents and tools, and examples of social science in the mass media; and *demonstrating that social science is both an art and a science* by providing a glimpse into individual researchers' trials and tribulations in the field.

The first page of each chapter includes a roadmap of the chapter's content in an easy-to-read text box. This outline identifies the chapter's major sections and subsections. Readers are eased into each chapter with examples of real-world research questions or a contemporary social problem to demonstrate the breadth and depth of social research. Concept Check questions at the end of every major section ask readers to define, compare and contrast, or provide examples of important concepts and topics to ensure mastery of the material and promote active reading. The text provides clear definitions and illustrations of the bold-faced key terms; these terms also are defined in the margins for easy reference. The key terms are listed once again in the end-of-chapter spread, with page numbers showing readers precisely where they can find the original definition. The end-of-chapter review recaps the main themes discussed in each of the chapter's subsections. But we want readers to do more than memorize concepts; we want you to get your hands dirty and do real research. To that end, each chapter includes an active learning assignment that involves carrying out key steps of the research process, whether selecting a sampling frame for a survey, doing a mini-ethnography at a campus sporting event, or diagramming and analyzing one's own social networks.

The book is rich with artwork and photographs that enliven the text and clarify key terms. Consistent with the belief that a picture is worth a thousand words, the book includes images of early Census data records, historical archives, geocoded maps, social network diagrams, technologies used in survey research labs, research field sites, and other components of the research process to bring abstract ideas to life. Each chapter also includes detailed charts, graphs, tables, and heuristic diagrams to illustrate and clarify the concepts, strategies, and results described in the text.

We also bring research to life through our "Conversations from the Front Lines" boxes in each chapter. These boxes feature sociologists talking about their research, the challenges they've faced, and innovative ways they have carried out their studies. The featured researchers represent highly diverse topics, methods, and career histories. For instance, Hollie Nyseth Brehm is an early career scholar doing influential work on genocide in Rwanda and the Sudan, while Tom Smith is an eminent senior scholar who has directed the General Social Survey (GSS) for nearly four decades.

Finally, "From the Field to the Front Page" features show how social science has an impact beyond the academy. These breakout boxes feature a recent study that captured the national imagination and was reported widely in the mass media. We provide insights into why particular studies are captivating to the general public, but we also urge readers to look beyond the "clickbait" headlines and to delve carefully into the study, to understand precisely what the researchers discovered and the methods they used to arrive at their conclusions.

In addition to the book itself, W. W. Norton provides extensive support materials for instructors and students. The Interactive Instructor's Guide includes helpful and detailed chapter outlines, discussion questions, suggested readings, and class activities. A coursepack for Blackboard and other learning management systems includes chapter quizzes, flashcards, podcast exercises, and more. Lecture PowerPoint slides with lecture notes as well as a Test Bank are also available. A big thank you to media editor Eileen Connell and associate media editor Mary Williams for overseeing the creation of this innovative support package.

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The Art and Science of
Social Research

The social world is complex and human beings are unpredictable, making sociological research both a science and an art.



01

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

An Introduction

Sociological Perspectives: An Overview

Agency versus Structure
Adopting a Sociological Imagination
Attention to Differences and Hierarchies
How Does Sociology Resemble—and
Differ from—Other Social Sciences?

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Designs

Unit of Analysis

Starting the Research Process: Choosing a Question and Setting Goals

Asking Questions

Research Goals: Description, Exploration,
and Explanation

Overview of This Book

You have probably spent long and lively evenings discussing and debating questions about the human condition such as the following:

- Why are some teenagers bullies, while others are victims of bullying?
- What traits do we look for in a potential romantic partner?
- What makes someone a political liberal or conservative?
- Why are some historical periods marked by protest and social unrest, while others appear to be calm and placid?

Even if not phrased in such lofty philosophical terms, most of us are hungry to understand our own behavior as well as the behaviors, beliefs, and feelings of those people who are most important to us. Why do some of our classmates succeed in school and



work, while others struggle? Why are so many college graduates today delaying marriage and childbearing until their thirties? Are blacks more likely than whites to suffer violence at the hands of police officers, and if so, why? Why are some corporate workplaces pleasant and enjoyable places to work, while others are tense and competitive? Some of the questions we debate transcend our own lives and focus on the world around us: Why do men and (to a lesser extent) women join violent and often radical organizations like ISIS or the National Alliance, a neo-Nazi group? Why do some time periods and geographic regions see particularly high rates of suicide, hate crimes, drug addiction, and other social problems? Why is women's sexuality punished in some cultures and celebrated in others?

sociology The scientific study of the social lives of individuals, groups, and societies.

macrosociology The study of large-scale social systems and processes such as the political system or the economy.

microsociology The study of personal concerns and interpersonal interactions.

Answering questions like these is the core mission of sociology. **Sociology** is the scientific study of the social lives of individuals, groups, and societies. It is a far-ranging, diverse, and exciting field of study, encompassing a seemingly endless number of topics. Sociologists explore both macro- and micro-level issues. **Macrosociology** focuses on large-scale social systems such as the political system or the economy, whereas **microsociology** focuses on personal concerns and interpersonal interactions such as doctor-patient relationships, how spouses negotiate housework and child-care arrangements, and the ways that one's peers might encourage law-abiding versus delinquent behavior. Yet macrosocial and microsocial phenomena are inextricably linked, where systems of economic and social inequalities affect even our most private decisions and feelings.

Students who are new to sociology sometimes think that it is the study of *everything*. But as we shall soon see, sociology is guided by several defining themes that distinguish it from other social sciences such as anthropology, psychology, and history. One of the most important themes is the **sociological imagination**, a distinctive viewpoint recognizing that our personal experiences are powerfully shaped by macrosocial and historical forces (Mills, 1959). Using the sociological imagination helps us to step back from our taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday life, especially the common assumption that our lives are shaped by our personal choices alone and that we are the masters of our own destinies.

sociological imagination A distinctive viewpoint, originated by C. Wright Mills, recognizing that our personal experiences are powerfully shaped by macrosocial and historical forces.

Sociology is also a science, or the rigorous and systematic study of individuals, groups, and social institutions. Sociologists answer questions by collecting and analyzing high-quality and verifiable data. Precisely how we carry out our research varies according to the questions we ask, the theories guiding our work, the types of populations we are interested in studying, and practical concerns such as the financial costs of carrying out research or ability to gain access to the people, corporations, subcultures, or nations we would like to study. As we will show throughout this book, sociologists have many methods and tools for carrying out their research. These research methods fall into two broad categories: quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative research encompasses the collection and analysis of numerical data, often obtained from surveys or social network information. Qualitative methods emphasize interpretation and observation, using approaches such as open-ended interviews or rich descriptions of social settings and groups. A third

category, mixed methods, combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the goal of providing richer insights than would have been achieved using only one of the two approaches (Small, 2011).

You will learn much more about the distinctive characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods in Part 3 of this book. Much of this book focuses on describing precisely what methods sociologists use, offering a step-by-step guide so that you can carry out your own research study. To get a sense of the diversity of methods used by sociologists, consider that some researchers conduct surveys of literally thousands of high school seniors in the United States each year (Miech et al., 2016a), while others observe at close hand a specific group of people, such as sex workers in Southeast Asia (Hoang, 2015). Some sociologists conduct experiments to understand how a new workplace policy will affect employees' productivity and job satisfaction (Moen et al., 2016), while others dig deep into historical archives to identify the social and political conditions that enable charismatic leaders to rise to power (Skocpol, 1979).

At first blush, these four examples of sociological research couldn't be more different from one another, yet they share two very important characteristics: They rely on high-quality data and use systematic approaches to answer their questions. These two characteristics distinguish sociology from casual, or "armchair," observations. Our casual observations of the world may be insightful, and they may pique our interest enough to explore a particular research topic more deeply. However, our casual observations typically focus on our friends, families, or the neighborhoods in which we live and work; as such, they are not typically **generalizable**, meaning they do not characterize the human condition far beyond our immediate social world.

As you learn about research methods and the real-life experiences of sociologists, it will become clear that sociological research is both an art and a science. Sociology is clearly a science, with well-established guidelines for carrying out rigorous research on social behavior. As you'll learn in Chapter 4, sociologists take measurement seriously and work hard to develop effective measures even of seemingly fuzzy or subjective phenomena such as loneliness or beauty. Yet social research is a challenging scientific enterprise because people are not as predictable as cells or molecules. As a result, our research methods must take into account the fact that countless (and ever-changing) factors shape human social life. For this reason, sociological research is also an art form, requiring creativity, thoughtful interpretation, nimble problem-solving, a critical eye (often cast on our own work), and the recognition that human beings often are not rational and predictable creatures. But this is precisely what makes social science research so intriguing.

We begin this chapter by providing a brief overview of sociology and its guiding themes, as well as a discussion of how sociology differs from other social sciences such as anthropology or psychology. We then provide a glimpse into the broad approaches that sociologists use: basic and applied research, qualitative and quantitative methods, and studies that collect data at a single point in time

generalizable The extent to which results or conclusions based on one population can be applied to others.

and those that collect data at multiple time points. We offer a brief sketch of the research process, its goals, and the factors that researchers must consider before embarking on a research project. We conclude with an overview of the chapters that follow. We hope that this brief introduction whets your appetite for social research and sparks ideas for the kinds of questions you might explore as part of your social research methods course.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: AN OVERVIEW

Sociological perspectives encourage us to identify and understand the complex interconnections between the behavior of individuals and the structures of the societies in which they live. As we strive to understand the complex interplay between microsocial and macrosocial phenomena, three themes may orient our thinking. First, sociology emphasizes the importance of both agency and structure in shaping human behavior. Second, adopting a sociological imagination helps us understand that many seemingly “personal troubles” are actually symptoms of more sweeping “public issues” (Mills, 1959). Third, sociologists recognize that personal characteristics, such as race, social class, and gender, expose us to different structural opportunities as well as constraints. We describe how and why these three orienting themes are such an integral part of sociology relative to other social science disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, and history.

Agency versus Structure

agency Our capacity to make our own choices and act autonomously.

social structures The patterned social arrangements that may constrain (or facilitate) our choices and opportunities.

Our everyday lives are shaped by both agency and structure. **Agency** is our capacity to make our own choices and act independently. We may believe that we freely choose where to attend college, whom to fall in love with, what career path to pursue, and whether to live a healthy or unhealthy lifestyle. Yet sociologists recognize that these personal choices are influenced by **social structures**, the patterned social arrangements that may constrain (or facilitate) our choices and opportunities (McIntyre, 2013). For instance, your decision of where to go to college was likely influenced by your (or your parents’) ability to pay tuition. You can’t fall in love with someone you’ve never met, and most of the people we meet live in our neighborhoods and attend our schools. Even those people we “meet” through Internet dating sites and apps like Tinder tend to come from social backgrounds similar to our own. The jobs we take depend on our educational credentials and the extent to which a career counselor encourages or dissuades us from entering a particular field. The choice to adopt a healthy lifestyle is much easier for people who can afford gym memberships and nutritious low-calorie meals. Sociological research helps demonstrate the ways that individuals make and carry out their choices within the constraints of social structures.

Adopting a Sociological Imagination

The notion that individual lives are powerfully shaped by forces outside of ourselves, such as economic or historical factors, is a guiding theme of C. Wright Mills’s (1959) classic writings on the sociological imagination. According to Mills, “The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills,

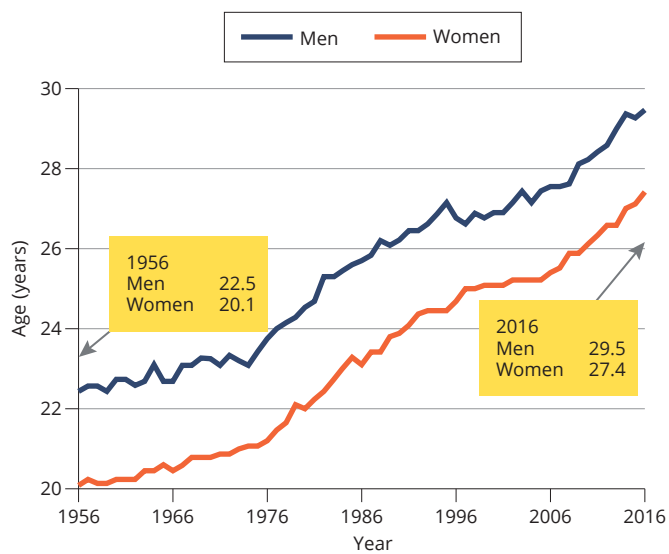
1959, p. 7). That means we cannot understand human behavior merely by viewing individual actors as free agents who are disconnected from larger sociohistorical contexts. Rather, our biographies are a product of personal experiences and historical forces. Viewing the world through the lens of the sociological imagination can be challenging because people in Western societies like the United States are socialized to view the world in terms of individual achievement and failure. For instance, we don't often consider that a "self-made millionaire" might have benefited from things like a thriving postwar economy or entitlement programs like the GI Bill that provided free college for veterans returning home from World War II. Conversely, we have a tendency to view people's problems as the result of their own individual shortcomings such as laziness or bad luck (Zuckerman, 1979).

The sociological imagination teaches us that what we may think of as "personal troubles," such as marital problems, substance abuse, difficulty paying for college tuition or maintaining a work-life balance, may instead be "public issues," or widespread problems that have social roots and are shared by many others (Mills, 1959). These roots are often related to the structure of society and the changes happening within it. To apply the sociological imagination to a real-world example, let's revisit a trend noted in this chapter's introduction: the rising age of first marriage in the United States. As Figure 1.1 shows, the median age at which Americans marry has risen steadily over the past 50 years. In 1960, the median age at which women and men married for the first time was 20 and 23, respectively. By 2016, these ages had climbed steadily up to 27 and nearly 30. Some observers may sneer that young people today are too immature, selfish, or unfocused to settle down. Millennials, the generation born between 1980 and 2000, have been derided as the "Me, me, me generation" who refuse to "grow up" (Stein, 2013).

By applying the sociological imagination to this question—Why are young people postponing marriage?—we may start to recognize that seemingly personal choices are deeply intertwined with larger social and historical forces. Most people want to wait until they are "financially ready" to marry, meaning they want to have a good job and a stable place to live. But securing a good job today often requires a bachelor's or even a master's degree, which means staying in school longer than prior generations did. And rising housing costs mean that young people often need to work for several years after graduation to scrape together a down payment. The urge to marry young also has faded in recent years for cultural reasons, including greater acceptance of premarital sex and non-marital cohabitation. Sixty years ago, a young couple who was passionately in love might make a quick dash to the altar so that they could have sex as a married couple, lest they be considered immoral. Today, couples feel little pressure to "wait for marriage," so they can enjoy sexual intimacy without rushing into marriage. Many couples live together, enjoying all the benefits of marriage without having to bear the high costs of a wedding. In short, sociologists recognize that even the most private and personal

FIGURE 1.1 Median Age at First Marriage, 1956–2016

The median age at first marriage in the United States increased steadily for men and women between 1956 and 2016.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.



In the mid-1950s, the average bride was just 20 years old and her groom 22 years old.

intersectionality A theoretical tradition emphasizing that our overlapping identities and group memberships are critical to our life experiences.

choices about love and marriage are shaped by the far less romantic forces of economy and history.

Mills further observed that if seemingly “personal choices” are happening in large numbers or in patterned ways, then we are likely witnessing a public issue rather than a personal trouble. If a handful of Millennials are delaying marriage, that may be an indication of a personal decision or preference, but if large proportions are doing so, that alerts us to the fact that this is a major social issue rather than the idiosyncratic choice of a few. Using the sociological imagination as a lens through which to observe the world may help empower individuals to transform their personal dissatisfaction or self-blame into public concerns in order to facilitate social change.

Attention to Differences and Hierarchies

The sociological imagination emphasizes the role of historical contexts in shaping our lives, while other sociological approaches focus more broadly on other macrosocial or structural factors that affect our lives. One of the most important areas of inquiry in sociology is understanding the ways that social hierarchies of race, class, gender, age, and other axes of inequality affect our lives. For instance, research done in the traditions of feminist theory and critical race theory, which we describe in Chapter 2, emphasize how gender and race hierarchies affect nearly every aspect of individuals’ lives, while conflict theories emphasize the centrality of social class. Other scholars work in a tradition called **intersectionality**, which emphasizes that our overlapping identities and group memberships, such as being a middle-class black woman or working-class white man, are critical to our life experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). As we shall see throughout the book, researchers working in nearly every sociological tradition consider at least some dimensions of social difference in their research and design their studies to enable comparisons of these different groups.

HOW SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CAN SHED LIGHT ON SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Considering simultaneously the themes of the sociological imagination and differences helps us gain important insights into how social change may unfold differently on the basis of one’s social location. To give one example, let’s revisit the question of marriage timing: Why are young adults today delaying marriage until their late-twenties and thirties? We noted earlier that this seemingly personal choice is shaped by macrosocial trends, including an economy that favors those with college or advanced degrees, rising housing costs, and shifting cultural beliefs about nonmarital sex and cohabitation (Arnett, 2014; Furstenberg, 2016). Yet when we consider the marital choices of particular subpopulations, especially African American women, we see that many other issues are at play.

Social scientists have observed that black women are not merely delaying marriage; rather, a considerable proportion may not marry at all. The U.S. Census examined the proportion of women in the United States who had not yet married and compared these proportions on the basis of whether a woman was white, black, Latino, or Asian (Figure 1.2). Although most women had married by the time they reached age 50, black women were far less likely to have married than women of other races. Fewer than 10% of white women were still single by age 50, compared to 25% of black women. These

analyses are based on relatively older adults, who have already reached their 50th birthdays (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). However, researchers have also used sophisticated statistical methods to project how many Generation X and Millennial women will stay single for life: they estimate that more than 80% of white women born in 1980 will marry, yet just half of black women born in 1980 will do so (Martin, Astone, & Peters, 2014).

Understanding the reasons for and implications of these patterns requires the skills and insights of both quantitative and qualitative researchers. Quantitative analysts have focused on identifying explanations for these trends and point to the shortage of “marriageable” black men: Sociologist William Julius Wilson has argued that high rates of imprisonment and premature death are removing men from the communities where they would otherwise marry. High rates of unemployment, especially in urban areas with few job prospects, mean that large numbers of black men may be viewed as not “marriageable” in the eyes of women (Wilson, 2012). Other researchers point out that black women are more likely than black men to earn a college degree and take a professional job, so the economic incentive to marry—the notion that two paychecks are better than one—is less relevant for women of color (Martin, Astone, & Peters, 2014).

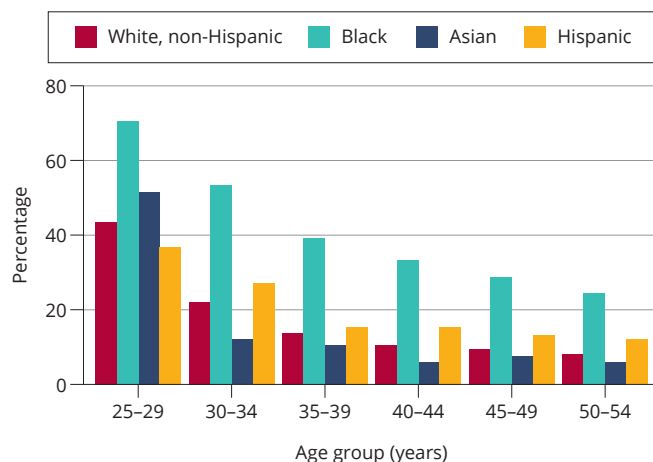
Qualitative researchers, by contrast, delve deeply into what these patterns may mean for black women’s daily lives. Sociologist Averil Clarke (2011) conducted open-ended interviews with more than 50 middle-class heterosexual black women and found that singlehood was not due to personal choice or the decision to privilege career over romance. Rather, it reflected persistent social inequalities, similar to those noted by the quantitative researchers. Clarke detailed how singlehood and bleak romantic prospects could take a personal toll: Some women repeatedly returned to incompatible partners, while others lost hope of ever finding “Mr. Right.” Many rejected the prospect of becoming single mothers, not wanting to affirm a negative stereotype of black women’s sexuality—a stereotype that was inconsistent with their personal and professional identities. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, researchers working in all methodological traditions can help untangle the complex interrelations among macrosocial factors, such as history, the economy, and systems of inequality, and micro-level phenomena, such as health, family formation, criminal behavior, work experiences, and the like.

How Does Sociology Resemble—and Differ from—Other Social Sciences?

Sociology is such a broad and inclusive field of study that many of the topics investigated by sociologists also are of great interest to social scientists working in other disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, and history. Each of these academic disciplines is also methodologically and substantively rich, and it would be a disservice

FIGURE 1.2 Percentage of Women Never Married by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin, 2009

The proportion of U.S. women who have never married is consistently higher among black women compared to white, Asian, and Hispanic women.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.