

Investigator files: using sociology to investigate religion and worldviews

It's great to ask lots of questions about life, the world, and what people think, believe and do. You can explore the same topic by asking different kinds of questions. You can also use different methods for answering these questions. This affects the kind of answer you get – which in turn affects what knowledge is produced.

We are going to introduce you to some investigators who look at things from their specialist discipline.

Here, our resident psychologist, Dr Rachael Shillitoe, introduces the discipline of sociology.

Introducing sociology

Sociologists are interested in society. We look at individuals, groups and organisations that make up society. We ask questions about people's everyday lives, and how they experience each other and the world around them. We also ask big questions about how society is structured, how it works and how it changes. We are interested in how individuals create and shape the world around them, and, in turn, how

society (and its parts) affect the daily lives of individuals.

Sociologists look at lots of different topics. We look at things like crime, gender and sexuality, inequalities and race. We look at things like religion, consumption and social class. Often these interests overlap and sociologists think about how all these things connect and affect each other. For example, a sociologist looking at inequalities would also think about gender, race and social class.

Sociologists of religion are interested in all these things. We want to know about people's day to day lives, but we also want to look at the bigger picture and see what whole populations think and do. Sociologists of religion ask people questions about their beliefs

or practices, what their experiences of religion have been like and how has that informed their current identities. For example, if you were brought up in a religious family and attended a faith school, did these affect your belief, attitudes and identity and if so how.

So, the question is: how do sociologists learn about this? One way is to ask people directly, using interviews and questions, or spending time with them to find out lots of detail about how they live. But sociologists also want to ask about lots of people's views, or to find out about whole countries or even the world! These sociologists will use surveys and questionnaires so they can ask more people and get a better idea about how whole populations act, think and feel about things.

Dr Rachael Shillitoe outlines some key features of sociology:

What do you investigate?

Sociologists are interested in the study of social life and everything that makes up society: gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, the family etc. We investigate the structure of groups, institutions and societies, and the relationships between people and these structures.

Sociologists are interested in understanding the human experience as well as investigating how and why things happen. We try to understand the causes, effects and experiences of matters like inequality, crime, migration and discover the kinds of processes at work in our social worlds.

There are many different types of sociologists who will investigate different things. Some sociologists will ask questions about the

individual experience while others will examine bigger processes at a global level.

Sociologists will also differ depending on the methods they use, some favouring quantitative approaches and others qualitative. Ultimately sociologists want to know how their area of study (e.g. religion) is shaped by and shapes particular social and cultural contexts and then to try understand how these relate to broader debates in social theory.

What kinds of questions do you ask?

Loads of different kinds! Sociologists try to ask questions that go beyond surface-level understandings of life and try to uncover the meanings and process that often go unobserved.



By doing this, sociological research should help us understand our lives in a new way. Sociologists will often ask questions that also concern other people, for example, what effects does gender inequality have on our lives? The questions sociologists ask need to be as precise as possible, and factual evidence is then gathered before drawing any conclusions. The questions sociologists ask will also inform the methods used. In sociology there are:

- **Factual questions:** for example, how many people identify as Christian in the UK?

- **Comparative questions:** for example, about particular situations in different countries or societies, such as what does it mean to be non-religious in the UK, India or Japan?
- **Developmental questions:** for example, ones that investigate changes and developments over time, or seek to find out whether children are less religious than their grandparents.
- **Theoretical questions.** When sociologists gather data and learn about these facts, they pose theoretical questions about what this data tells us about wider issues connected to the nature of our social worlds more broadly, and the relationship between individual and society.

How do you find out the answers?

We often ask people directly; we also spend time observing people by participating in their lives. We use lots of different tools and methods (see below) to gather information.

What tools do you use?

There are lots of tools we can use when conducting sociological research. Some sociologists do **quantitative** research. They gather large sets of data to make comparisons across whole populations. They might conduct surveys and gather statistics. The Pew Research Centre is one example www.pewforum.org

Some sociologists do **qualitative** research and gather data through, for example, ethnography.

Ethnography involves identifying a group or community to study and spending time with them to understand things from their point of view. We call this **field work**. The length of time spent with a community varies and can include:

- getting involved in daily life and routines
- making observations
- engaging in informal conversations with participants and
- interviewing them to discuss questions and observations arising from the field work.

There are also more creative and participatory approaches such as using photographs. You could provide your participant with images and ask them questions about them to elicit information. Or perhaps ask your participant to take photos themselves of spaces or places that will help you answer your research question. Asking participants to write diaries is another way to capture data which may be missed in interviews.

What evidence do you look for?

Sociologists will look for qualitative or quantitative evidence using large scale data sets and also smaller samples, finding out how people understand and experience the world around them.

What are the basic methods you use?

We always **start with a question**. What do we want to know? Do we want to know how many people attend places of worship, believe in God or identify as non-religious?

We **do a lot of reading** too! We find out who else has asked these questions, what they have found, what answers still remain and what could we do to contribute something original to this area we are researching.

Once we have our research questions, we then need to **figure out how to answer them** and it's our research questions that will shape the methods we use.

The approach we use, qualitative or quantitative (or sometimes both!) and the methods we use (surveys, interview, participant observation) should all be about answering our research questions. We then spend a lot of time **designing and piloting** it (trying it out with sample participants, to check it works). We then go and **gather our data and collect the results and analyse them**, looking for interesting lines of enquiry and recurring patterns. That enables us to **come up with some theories** to provide some sort of explanation of why we have found what we have found.

What assumptions do you need to look out for?

We always need to think about our own **positionality** and **subjectivity** as a researcher. That is, how our position and our beliefs, identity and experiences may affect the research we conduct. To avoid bias, we want to try and limit this and take account of it wherever possible. Ultimately, we can't take ourselves out of the research – we are part of it. So that's why it's important to be **reflexive** (keep reflecting on ourselves) and continuously examine our own position and how this may influence or affect the research we are conducting.

How do you evaluate your methods and conclusions?

A crucial thing to recognise is that for sociologists of religion, religion is always a social and cultural phenomenon – there is no such thing as a 'pure' religion, separate from the social and cultural.

We pick and **design our methods** very carefully, thinking about the types of questions we are asking, how we are asking them and the order we are putting them in.

Consistency is important. So, for example, in some interviews we respond to participants' answers, so the interviews will vary. (We call these 'semi-structured' interviews.) The answers will not be identical, so it is important that the kinds of interview questions are consistent, to allow the researcher to observe trends in the data collected.

Putting together an interview schedule often takes a lot of time, a lot of revisions and piloting (testing). Sometimes it's good to ask broader, less directive questions because it can give your participants more ownership in how they answer them. For example, rather than asking, 'what religion do you belong to?' a sociologist may decide to choose a more open question which doesn't assume someone belongs to a religion.

A good example of this can be found in the British Social Attitudes survey which asks the question 'Do you

regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’ In contrast, the UK Census asked, ‘What is your religion’. The British Social Attitudes survey always gets higher levels of reporting of no religion, so sociologists have reflected on this and considered how the framing of questions may lead more people to answer in one particular way than another.

It’s always important to make sure the questions we ask our interviewees do answer the bigger question which our research project seeks to address. So, an interviewer might start broadly (‘What do you believe in?’) before following up with a question specifying particular beliefs (‘Do you believe in God?’). This might be because the interviewer does really want to know about whether their participant does believe in God or not, but doesn’t want to limit the type of response the interviewee may give. Starting the interview with a broader question means that if the participant doesn’t mention God, the researcher can bring it up later to get a more specific response.

For researchers who use case studies just examining one single case, or for those who use methods like ethnography, it is not possible to have tools that are replicable and that generate the same results every time. So we must **analyse** the data, **looking for recurring patterns** within the data, or across different data sets. Good qualitative data tends to be rich, offering a thick* description of what we are investigating. This means **we allow different possible conclusions** to be drawn from it.

* A ‘thick’ description includes not just how people behave but why they are behaving that way.

When drawing conclusions, sociologists always need to think about **causation and correlation**, i.e. cause and effect. We look for causation, i.e. a causal relationship between events and situations, where some event produces or causes something else.

But crucially *correlation does not always equal causation*. Correlation means the regular relationship between two sets of occurrences of variables. Just because you can see a link between two sets of data does not mean that one set causes the other. So, sociologists need to be careful and think about whether correlations do involve causation or not, and try to decide the direction of causal relations if any.

Can you apply your answers to everyone?

This entirely depends on the type of research being conducted.

For case study researchers and ethnographers, for example, findings from these kinds of studies cannot be generalisable to others or to representative bigger populations. Ethnographic studies will often have far fewer participants than large scale surveys, and will often focus on one group or case study. But importantly, making generalisations to other cases or populations is not the point of their research. This type of research can provide insight into areas of social life and human experience which surveys just can’t access. These kinds of studies might **generalise to theory** rather than population – that is, to think about what the data can say about the theoretical frameworks we use. This is still insightful, as it can help us understand the way societies work, the different structures and processes involved, and what this can tell us about our past, present and future lives.

On the other hand, sociologists who conduct surveys concern themselves with being able to generalise their findings to larger populations, and will try to ensure that their survey sample is both large enough and varied enough to be representative of the wider group they are studying.