

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Describe how sociologists utilize the empirical and the interpretive framework to critically examine social situations

Because sociology examines social relationships and behavior (things everyone is familiar with in some way), sometimes the concepts you cover in this course will seem like common sense. Yet one of the aspects of sociology that makes it an exciting discipline is that it strives to utilize the scientific method to find ways to check common sense and to critically examine perceived relationships and meanings.

Empirical Framework

We often have opinions about social situations, but these may be biased by our expectations or based on limited data. Instead, scientific research is based on **empirical evidence**, which is evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation. Conducting research and testing a hypothesis in a controlled setting through deductive methods is the typical process for obtaining empirical evidence.

For example, many people believe that crime rates go up when there's a full moon, but research doesn't support this opinion. Psychologists Rotton and Kelly (1985) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the full moon's effects on behavior. **Meta-analysis** is a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together. Rotton and Kelly's meta-analysis included thirty-seven prior studies on the effects of the full moon on crime rates, and the overall findings were that full moons are entirely unrelated to crime, suicide, psychiatric problems, and crisis center calls (cited in Arkowitz and Lilienfeld 2009). We may each know of an instance in which a crime happened during a full moon, but it was likely just a coincidence.

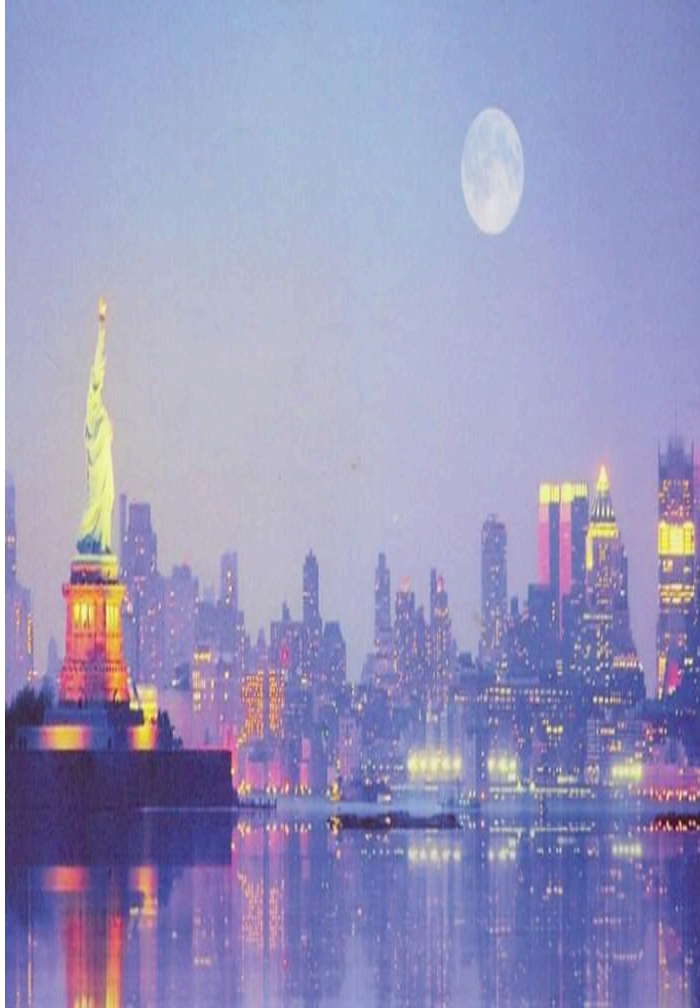


Figure 1. Many believe that crime rates go up during the full moon, but scientific research does not support this conclusion. (Photo courtesy of Jubula 2/flickr)

Interpretive Framework

While empirical evidence is very useful, sociologists have found that some social phenomena cannot be easily studied using the traditional scientific method. Sometimes it is necessary to utilize what is called an **interpretive framework**, which focuses on gathering information instead of designing a study. While systematic, this approach doesn't follow the hypothesis-testing model that seeks to find generalizable results. Instead, an interpretive framework seeks to understand social worlds from the point of view of participants, which leads to in-depth knowledge.

Interpretive research is generally more descriptive or narrative in its findings. Rather than

formulating a hypothesis and applying a method for testing it, an interpretive researcher will develop approaches for exploring the topic at hand that may involve a significant amount of direct observation or interaction with subjects. This type of researcher also learns as he or she proceeds and sometimes adjusts the research methods or processes midway to optimize findings as they evolve.

Evictions in the U.S.: An Empirical and interpretive approach

Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond combined both empirical research methods with the interpretive framework to shed light on a topic that had not been systematically researched—evictions. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Desmond provided a sweeping narrative of eight families in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who were “swept up in the process of eviction” (2016).

Desmond also created the first nationwide database of evictions by examining 83 million court records dating back to 2000. Using secondary sources, Desmond compiled information that has resulted in a national conversation about poverty, inequality, and public policy.

Watch here as Desmond discusses ethnography and how it relates to studying eviction, and how he collected hundreds of thousands of eviction notices, millions of 911 calls, and other types of data to create a fuller picture of eviction and poverty in the United States:



[Video Link](#)

Try It

A researcher who designs an experiment about classroom teaching styles in elementary schools uses the scientific method to gather _____. Another research studying the same topic uses the _____ by interviewing students, teachers, and administrators.

interpretive evidence; experimental method

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Have you ever wondered if home schooling affects a person's later success in college or how many people wait until they are in their forties to get married? Do you wonder if texting is changing teenagers' abilities to spell correctly or to communicate clearly? How do social movements like Occupy Wall Street develop? How about the development of social phenomena like the massive public "fan" communities that follow Star Trek and the Harry Potter series?

Sociological research attempts to answer a vast array of questions, such as these and more, about our social world. Sociologists use empirical data and/or an interpretative framework to increase understanding of societies and social interactions, but in all cases research begins with the pursuit of an answer to a question. Paradoxically, the most interesting research findings often lead to more research!

Glossary

empirical evidence: evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation
interpretive framework: a sociological research approach that seeks in-depth understanding of a topic or subject through observation or interaction; this approach is not based on hypothesis testing, but is typically more narrative or descriptive
meta-analysis: a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together

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- Urban Sociologist Matthew Desmond, 2015 MacArthur Fellow. **Provided by:** macfound. **Located at:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wajNrp43q8M>. **License:** *Other*. **License Terms:** Standard YouTube License

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