# Researching the Researchers:
## Agency and Constraint in Topic, Method, and Subject Choice among Sociology Researchers

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## Research Questions

- Why do social science researchers tend to study disadvantaged populations rather than powerful ones?
- How do sociology researchers decide what topics to examine, what methods to use, and what data or population to use to study that topic?
- What do sociology researchers see as the goal of their own research, as well as the goal of sociology research as a whole, and how does their research fit into that? How do they mediate areas where those goals differ?
- To what degree are research pragmatics determined by internal motivations and external incentives? When do the two converge, and when do they differ?

## Introduction

In 1972 Laura Nader[1] observed that social scientists tend to study "the poor, the ethnic groups, the disadvantaged" and suggested that researchers should shift to focus on "studying up". This pattern holds today, but there is little work examining researchers to understand why.

Work examining the colonizing function of anthropologists suggests that social scientists tend to study the "other" or the colonized people that are framed as mysterious and unknown by dominant ideology[2], referred to as the self/other theory.

Bourdieu's field theory of science suggests that research pragmatics are determined by dominant sociologists, who have the power and prestige to set the standards for the field[3].

Gramscian concepts of ideological hegemony suggest that research pragmatics are determined by forces external to researchers themselves, that as laborers they are subject to the interests and needs of people with accumulated forms of capital[4]. This is expressed through the actors in the research process that are not academics, such as publishers, university administrators, and funding agencies.

I examine how researchers decide who to study, what to study, and how to study it through semi-structured interviews with practicing sociology researchers at the University of Washington.

## Definitions

**Research pragmatics** – The process for a researcher of deciding what to study (topic choice), who to study (subject choice), and how to study it (method choice). This includes both internal desires of the researcher and external incentives acting upon the researcher.

**Sociological research** – I use a narrow definition of research, which refers to work by people professionally charged with social inquiry for the purpose of wider distribution[5].

## Methods

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 professors, 5 graduate students, and 2 affiliates in the sociology department at the University of Washington.

- The sample was a strong majority white, majority men, with ages ranging from mid twenties to early seventies.

- Interviews transcribed manually

- Transcriptions were then coded based on an iterative coding scheme that developed from backing theory and prevalent themes during interviews.



Savery Hall, home of UW's sociology department

## Results

- Limited but substantial support for the self/other theory.

- Significant support for external constraints, exerted through funding sources and publishing standards, varying based on a researcher's prestige and tenure status.

- Field theory of science is supported, with advisors and teachers exerting significant influence on early career researchers' research pragmatics.
  - Usually framed as helpful, not constraining.

- Early career decisions result in specialization that encourages continued use of similar topics, subjects, and methods throughout their career.

## Acknowledgements

## Discussion

- Publishing demands are a strong influence on research pragmatics.
  - Researchers focus on work for an academic audience that is quickly publishable because employers value publications.
  - Worsened by an increasingly competitive academic job market: "I have to get in a good university that's well funded otherwise my job will always be in precarity"
  - Publication standards are at odds with socially impactful research.
  - Pressure lessens once a researcher has tenure, but it is not gone: "I want to have this balance of doing good for the world and doing publications. But for them the coin of the realm until they have tenure is just the publication part"

- Personal motivations among researchers depends on whether the researcher identifies as a member of the studied group.
  - When studying the other, researchers express their motivation in terms of curiosity and accumulating knowledge.
  - When a researcher studies the self, they express their motivation more in terms of wanting to correct public misconceptions.
  - Some researchers intentionally avoid this dynamic.

- Research pragmatics are strongly influenced by what data is easily accessible.
  - Primary data collection is time and money intensive.
  - Access depends on gatekeeping organizations.
  - Secondary data is easier to find for quantitative projects.
  - Further work should investigate how research pragmatics operate at data collection agencies.

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