Is Sociology a Science?

A Classroom Exercise for Promoting Discussion*

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*I wish to thank Dave Hummon for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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Abstract

Though sociology was founded on the idea that the social order is subject to scientific study, the “science” question remains controversial. By learning about this controversy, students can learn much about the discipline. This paper describes an exercise, together with data collected from six classes, that asks students to project their personal images of scientists and social scientists. These images invariably contain half-truths and misconceptions that can be used to address three related questions: (1) What is science? (2) How is sociology scientific? and (3) What are the major challenges to sociology as a science? I draw upon my own students’ responses to show how the exercise can generate a wide-ranging discussion of these issues.
The question of whether sociology is a science has a long history in the discipline. It was addressed by virtually all the classical social theorists. But for some time the debate about the scientific status of sociology was muted. In the post-World War II period up to the early 1960s, quantitative methods were ascendant and theorists and methodologists alike embraced sociology as a positivist endeavor. Since then, however, a sharp division has arisen “between those who are committed to sociology as a science and those who remain skeptical and critical of such pretensions” (Turner and Turner, 1990:7).

Examples of this split are numerous. Consider the exchange between Randall Collins (1986, 1987) and Norman Denzin (1987) in the American Journal of Sociology, the Report of the ASA Task Force on Graduate Education (TAGGE), and two divergent answers to Stephen Cole’s (1994) question, “What is Wrong with Sociology?” in a recent special issue of The Sociological Forum. Collins extolled the virtues of a sociological science, while Denzin claimed that postmodern social theory challenges the effort “to create a science of the social.” According to the TAGGE Report, “the emergence of post-positivist views within sociology has undermined the methods and research strategies that the discipline needs for its legitimation as a science” (“On the Well-Being of Graduate Departments,” 1994). In response to Coles’ query, James Davis (1994:188) argued that the discipline has not drawn “a firm line between what is legitimate academic sociology and what is not,” so that it has “put up with an appalling amount of bunk,” including such antiscientific schools as postmodernism, humanistic sociology, and critical theory. Harvey Molotch (1994), by contrast, contended that the discipline’s malaise may be cured in part by escaping the “science trap,” as “the science model, crudely applied, holds back all varieties of sociology.”

Thus it seems as true today as it was in C. Wright Mills’s (1959:119) day that “the confusion in the social sciences . . . is wrapped up with the long-continuing controversy about the nature of Science.” It also follows that by learning about the meaning of science and current controversies surrounding its applicability in sociology, students could learn much about the discipline. Most introductory textbooks pose the question, “Is sociology a science?” Yet the answers tend to be superficial and equivocal, leaving the impression that the question is unworthy of much attention. Even many research methods textbooks limit coverage of the general nature of science to relatively brief sections in introductory chapters (see, for example, Babbie, 1995; Bailey, 1994; Schutt, 1996).

To remedy this neglect, I propose an exercise designed to generate a broad discussion of the nature of science. For several years I have performed this exercise early in my research methods course. I begin by asking students about their perceptions of scientists. Their answers invariably reveal kernels of truth as well as gaps and distortions in their collective image of science, which serve to fuel a class discussion. My approach is decidedly proscience. If students can understand what science really is, I reason, then they can appreciate better the scientific conception of sociology and the task of social research methods.

Although I always have told my students that some sociologists challenge sociology’s scientific status, I have tended to dismiss these criticisms as minority views. To address such assaults on the discipline, I have rationalized, would be too much of an aside from the goal of the
exercise. Increasingly, however, as antiscientific views within sociology have become more dominant, I have become uneasy with my approach. Indeed, I now believe the exercise can effectively serve a dual purpose: to describe those features that make a discipline scientific and to elucidate the principal claims and counterclaims that sociology lacks scientific validity. Discussing antiscientific critiques in methods courses would further clarify assumptions that influence methodology; in introductory courses it would provide a more complete and up-to-date picture of the discipline.

Below I describe the background and basic approach of the demonstration exercise. Using data from six classes, I present my students’ collective images of a scientist. Then I discuss how these images may be used effectively to debunk myths about science, to outline the key ingredients of scientific inquiry, and to introduce current and historical controversies regarding a scientific conception of sociology.

GENERATION AND SUMMARY OF STUDENT IMAGES OF SCIENCE

Toward the end of the first class meeting, I ask students to respond in writing to the following sentence completions:

1. When I think about a scientist, I think of . . . .
2. If I were going to be a scientist, I should like to be the kind of scientist who . . . .
3. If I were going to be a scientist, I would not like to be the kind of scientist who . . . .
4. When I think of a social scientist, I think of . . . .

All the questions are asked orally, and students’ responses are collected after they have finished. At the next class meeting, I initially point out that the first three questions were drawn from a study of the image of the scientist among American high school students that was conducted in the mid-1950s (Mead and Metraux, 1962). Based on answers to these questions from a national sample, the “shared image” of the scientist at that time included the following (Mead and Metraux, 1962:236-38):

Science is natural science with little direct reference to [people] as social beings except as the products of science--medicine and bombs--affect [their lives]. . . .

The scientist is a man who wears a white coat and works in a laboratory. He is elderly or middle aged and wears glasses. . . . He may wear a beard, may be unshaven and unkempt. . . .

He is surrounded by equipment: test tubes, Bunsen burners, flasks and bottles, a jungle gym of blown glass tubes and weird machines with dials. . . .

He spends his days doing experiments. He pours chemicals from one test tube into another. He peers rapely through microscopes. He scans the heavens through a telescope . . . . He experiments with plants and animals, cutting them apart, injecting serum into animals. He writes neatly in black notebooks.
In addition to this shared portrait, Mead and Metraux also found divergent positive and negative perceptions, which were near mirror images of one another. The positive image, for example, described the scientist as a very intelligent person who has many years of education and training. The scientist takes his or her work seriously, is patient, careful, and dedicated, and works long hours in the laboratory to produce results that may promote the general welfare. On the negative side, the scientist was seen as a “brain” who works in a laboratory on dull and tedious tasks that may produce fruitless results even after years of work. Further, the scientist often works alone and is so involved in work that he or she has few other interests or friends, no social life, and is never home.

Using a very different methodology, Beardslee and O’Dowd (1962) found a highly similar image of the scientist among college students circa 1960. Moreover, my analysis of 144 questionnaires collected in six research methods classes from fall 1989 to spring 1996 suggests that this image may have changed very little in the past 30-40 years.1

Table 1 divides responses to question 1 among four aspects of students’ image of the scientist: physical, psychological, professional, and contextual. The majority of students clearly associated science first and foremost with natural science—chemistry, biology, and physics: 32 percent made specific reference to the “laboratory” or laboratory paraphernalia, such as test tubes and Bunsen burners, or envisioned the scientist in a “white lab coat”; another 8 percent mentioned a specific natural science field; and an additional 10 percent identified a specific natural scientist, such as Charles Darwin, Sir Isaac Newton, or Albert Einstein.2

Table 1. Responses to the Sentence Completion, “When I think about a scientist, I think of . . . .” as Percent of Cases (N=143).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Image</th>
<th>33.6a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a white laboratory coat</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing glasses or goggles</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Einstein or other famous scientist</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other physical characteristics (e.g., old, beard, wild hair).</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Image</th>
<th>23.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent, smart, educated</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverted, aloof, social isolate</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mad, eccentric, weird</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careful, meticulous</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other trait attributions (analytical, curious, hard-working)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Image</th>
<th>44.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher or experimenter</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific natural scientist (e.g., a chemist)</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solver</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analyst</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Physically, 11 percent pictured someone with glasses or goggles, and a few described someone who was “old” or “white-haired” or had “wild hair” (another 10 percent identified Albert Einstein, presumably conveying a similar physical image). Eleven percent saw the scientist as intelligent and/or well educated; a few mentioned curious and dedicated or hard working. Finally, this question, in addition to question 3, evoked a negative psychological image from a few students, who saw the scientist as unable to relate to others, as obsessive about work, and/or as eccentric, weird, or mad. The following student response combines several elements of this image: When I think of a scientist, I think of “the stereotypical bushy haired, bushy eyebrowed, black eyeglass-wearing mad scientist, with some type of bubbling potion in his or her hand.”

Table 2 shows the responses to the second and third questions. Two themes account for nearly three-quarters of the responses to question 2: students either wanted to be the kind of scientist whose work helps humanity, such as by finding cures for diseases, or they wanted to work outside the laboratory, preferably with people. For example, one student wrote that she would like to be the kind of scientist who “works with people rather than just being in a lab working with chemicals all day”; another wanted to “help find cures for . . . incurable diseases, serving to better society and the environment.”

Table 2. Responses to the Sentence Completions, “I should like to be the kind of scientist who . . . .” (N=141) and “I would not like to be the kind of scientist who . . . .” (N=139) as Percent of Cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I should like to be the kind of scientist who . . . .</th>
<th>29.1a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finds cures for diseases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps other people</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies people</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does research “outside the laboratory” or in a specific non-laboratory setting (e.g. marine biology, archaeology)</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes important discoveries</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does well-conducted research (e.g., avoids errors, is unbiased,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
investigates thoroughly) ................................. 9.9
Does meaningful research (e.g., does interesting work, cares
about my research) ................................. 9.2
Other .............................................. 8.5

I would not like to be kind of scientist who . . .

Makes weaponry ........................................ 10.1
Works in a laboratory .................................... 29.5
Works with animals ....................................... 7.2
Is a natural scientist ....................................... 10.8
Does fruitless, meaningless research ...................... 11.5
Does unethical or biased research ......................... 7.9
Is a social misfit (e.g., “a bore,” “cold, unfeeling,” “unable to
work with others”) ...................................... 7.2
Loses touch with reality (e.g., “not involved in the world,”
“spends all my time doing research”) ..................... 6.5
Other .............................................. 15.1

aPercent s do not add to 100 due to multiple responses.

Analogously, in response to question 3, students would not want to be the kind of
scientist who makes weapons or whose products harm humankind, and they did not want to be a
natural scientist or work in a laboratory or with animals. One student, for example, wrote that he
would not want “to create or discover things that can be used to the detriment of others (for
example, nuclear weapons).” Another did not want to be “isolated in a laboratory all day with
lots of long equations to figure out.”

Table 3 shows that students’ images of social scientists are quite different than their
images of scientists.3 Nearly half of the students, applying varying definitions, associated social
science with the content of sociology and related disciplines. For example, a social scientist was
thought of as someone who studies “the social world,” “patterns of behavior among humans, the
culture of groups of people,” or “relationships of various groups.” One in five students conjured
an image of a researcher, usually a survey researcher, whereas some 12 percent envisioned social
scientists as studying society for the purpose of helping others or effecting social change.

Table 3. Responses to the Sentence Completion, “When I think of a social scientist I think of . . .
” as Percent of Cases (N=142).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does research through surveys, fieldwork, etc</td>
<td>21.1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies social phenomena</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies society to bring about change</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works or deals with people</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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A specific social scientist or social science discipline ........... 6.3
Other ................................................................................. 9.8

aPercents do not add to 100 due to multiple responses.

DISCUSSION OF STUDENT IMAGES

To begin the class discussion, I tell students that there are no right or wrong answers to the exercise--that this was not a test. Rather, I was merely gathering information about their images of science in the manner of a social scientist. I was simply measuring their perceptions, not testing their accuracy. Of course, their images may or may not correspond with what is known about scientists. I then briefly summarize and give examples of their answers, after which I reveal how I myself would answer the questions. Finally, we identify the central features of their collective image, compare it with the textbook presentation of science, and discuss its implications.

The exercise may be used to address many issues. In my methods classes I draw upon students’ responses to discuss the nature of scientific inquiry. First I point out that students seem to reserve the label “scientist” for natural scientists--chemists, physicists, and biologists--as they rarely, if ever, conjure up images of sociologists or other social scientists. Yet, if sociology is a science, what does this mean? Is there a set of characteristics that define and unify all sciences? I emphasize two points: first, that there is no single, unified “scientific method,” that each discipline has its own distinct methods or techniques of inquiry; but, second, that all sciences--natural and social--share certain epistemic requirements. Philosopher of science Daniel Little (1995:42) notes, for example, that:

All sciences place a high value on the use of empirical research and observation as a central means of evaluating scientific assertion and hypothesis. All sciences require that systems of belief be logically coherent and developed. And all proceed through a community of inquirers in which the individual’s scientific results are subjected to community-wide standards of adequacy.

Students’ natural-science image of science raises a related question: Why is sociology seldom recognized as a science by the general public? I would speculate that the public image of science excludes sociology because it lacks the key ingredients of this image: abstract formulas, laboratory experiments, important discoveries with great practical significance. The general public, like the students in my classes, associates sociology with its subject matter rather than its methods or products of study, and for many it denotes social reformers and social commentators rather than empirical researchers.

Here one could also discuss the impact of the introductory course on students’ images. Stephan and Massey (1982:430), for example, argue that the typical introductory course in sociology is nearly the direct opposite of other introductory science courses: It is generally recent and superficial rather than primary [i.e., basic to the discipline, such as
Newtonian mechanics in physics and inorganic compounds and their elements in chemistry, complex rather than simple, controversial rather than consensual, verbal rather than quantitative, and it remains textbook- and lecture-confined rather than being do-able by the student.

As a consequence, according to Stephan and Massey, the field has far more scientific rigor than is presented in most introductory courses, students misperceive sociology “as a discipline of fashionable political causes and social issues,” and sociology attracts “a large number of students interested in metaphysical debates and issues” and notke in empirical research and quantitative analysis.

In many ways students’ images indicated that they have no intention of making science or scientific work a part of their lives. When my students thought of social scientists, they tended to think of what sociologists study and less often of research or how sociologists produce knowledge. Before my college’s reinstitution of breadth requirements, most students in my research methods course had taken few, if any, college courses in the natural sciences. Even more convincingly, the sentence completions revealed many negative trait attributions and openly hostile images of scientists. The typical scientist often is seen as hard working to an extreme, unsociable, and downright strange—in short, the kind of person that students would not want to be.

Such attitudes, reflecting avoidance and distancing, no doubt shape many students’ negative expectations about a course in research methods. But this stereotype can be challenged in several ways. One could point out the pleasure and attraction of doing scientific work: the intrinsic reward of intellectual activity, of trying to figure things out, the joy of perceiving regularities and connections in the social world, the anticipation of gathering data to test suspected relationships, and the excitement of having one’s hypotheses supported. One also could note that science is very much a social activity—that collaboration is the norm in scientific work and that by its very nature science involves the constant sharing of knowledge.

The exercise also reveals a glaring omission in the professional image of the scientist: students see scientists almost exclusively in the role of researcher or, more specifically, experimenter. Students also mention invention, discovery, exploration, and data analysis as other activities. But rarely do students think of theorists when they think of scientists, and they seem to see the source of scientific knowledge as hard work rather than imagination. Noting this aspect of students’ image can provide a lead-in to a discussion of the centrality of theory in science and to the importance of imagination in all phases of scientific work.

In methods courses, the exercise could facilitate a discussion of many other issues regarding the nature of science. One could ask: How have the mass media shaped students’ images of scientists? What distinguishes scientific inquiry from everyday observation and common sense? What are the major challenges to the conception of sociology as a science? A more sophisticated discussion could highlight the following five themes among current antiscience criticisms outlined by Randall Collins (1989:124):

(1) Sociology has failed to produce valid findings or lawful generalizations. (2) Deterministic laws do not exist because social action consists of situational interpretation, based on human subjectivity, reflexivity, and creativeness. (3) We are locked in a world of discourse; society itself is a kind of text that we read in
different ways at different times. (4) The foregoing position is often connected to
 historicism, the claim that only historical particulars exist, and no general laws
can be found that apply at all times and places. (5) Finally, there are various
technical criticisms of scientific methods and metatheory, especially of the
conception of causality.

Although Collins acknowledges the merit in some of these antiscience positions, he
rejects the essential thrust of each. Overall, according to Collins, such criticisms stem partly
from a narrow, outmoded conception of science. This includes, for example, a rigid
operationalization of concepts and the restriction of scientific knowledge to mathematical and
logical formalization. But as he points out, modern philosophy of science assumes that
explanatory models include nonoperationalized concepts at some levels and recognizes the role
of nonformalized statements in scientific knowledge. Addressing these criticisms thus may be a
means of informing students of historical issues and changes in the philosophy of science.

At the introductory level, students’ images of science and social science may be used to
spark discussion of two of the most important and longstanding traditions in the discipline:
interpretive sociology and critical theory. Each tradition is associated with a major classical
theorist--Weber and Marx, respectively--and current variants of each school are associated with
a postpositivistic philosophy of science.

First, noting students’ preference for studying people rather than animals or inanimate
objects (see Table 2), one could ask how sociologists’ objects of study influence their mode of
inquiry. According to the interpretive or subjectivist school of thought, studying human beings
diffs from investigating nonhuman objects because humans give purpose and meaning to their
actions. Thus the natural scientist can invoke interpretations without regard to how the objects
of study may interpret themselves. To understand human behavior, on the other hand, social
scientists necessarily must grasp the meaning that a human actor assigns to the action.

This distinction has many methodological consequences. We can ask people questions,
probing the reasons for their behavior. We can participate in their worlds in order to gain their
perspective. Yet we also must consider how people’s awareness of being questioned or observed
may affect their behavior. Some proponents of this school argue that human subjectivity
precludes the possibility of deterministic theories, hence science. Among the rebuttals are that
we simply need to incorporate subjective elements into our theories and that the high degree of
unpredictability of individual actions may be more predictable across individuals or at the macro
level (see Collins, 1989:127-131).

Second, one could mention the number of students (12%) who thought of social scientists
as social reformers (see Table 3). My students pictured “a radical” and “an activist,” “someone
who is concerned about the well-being of other people and who works to better society,” and
“someone who examines the society around him or her and tries to change or point out what is
wrong.” It seems likely that students expressing this vision of “social scientists” are identifying
a personal source of attraction to sociology. One could point out here that the idea of sociology
as a reform or critical discipline has strong roots in American sociology (Turner and Turner,
1990; Lipset, 1994). The field always has attracted religiously and politically motivated
reformers. Many important early figures (e.g., Park, Thomas, Cooley), moreover, “practiced a
sociological analysis which was in accordance with a severely critical assessment of the
American society which was taking form during their lifetime” (Shils, 1980).
This aspect of sociology has created persisting issues regarding the ways in which values, politics, and ideology may or may not be reconciled with a scientific discipline. One could point out that some sociologists once held that social scientists should strive to be “value-free” (e.g., Lundberg, 1961), but that the value-free ideology is no longer considered tenable for many reasons. Most basically, values affect the choice of research topics in sociology, just as values influence students’ choice of major. Scientists today also believe that they bear some responsibility for applications of their research findings. Indeed, the codes of professional ethics of the various social sciences all assert the special responsibility to prevent the misuse or destructive application of a scientist’s findings.

The rejection of the value-free ideology is part of a more general awareness of the subjective element in science. Scientists are not merely passive recorders of the social world or the world of nature. Rather, they actively interpret what they see, based on socially shared ideas and assumptions. Nor are scientists detached and dispassionate observers of the world. They naturally develop an intense commitment to their work and a deep investment in their ideas that may undermine their “objective” assessment of evidence. Now, many sociologists believe that neither of these limitations precludes the practice of science. Scientists can still operate according to the socially constructed reality that they “provisionally” accept (Griswold, 1990). And, they can critically evaluate the unexamined assumptions that may limit the scope and objectivity of their work.

Others contend, however, that these limitations are the fatal flaw in the scientific conception of sociology. Critical theorists, in particular, argue that science itself (or “positivism”) “has become a new mythology and ideology in the sense that it fails to understand its own investment in the status quo. . . . [It] has become the most dominant form of ideology in late capitalism in the sense that people everywhere are taught to accept the world ‘as it is,’ thus unthinkingly perpetuating it” (Agger, 1991:109). Rather than develop knowledge that describes the world as it is, critical theorists advocate social theorizing that imagines a different world, devoid of capitalism, social classes, and racism.

Finally, one might note possible consequences of the coexistence of these extreme views within the same discipline. Some regard this as a strength insofar as intellectual conflict serves to clarify assumptions, sharpen arguments, and refine theory and methods (cf. Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Others regard it as debilitating insofar as these differences represent the factional rejection of one another’s work (Collins, 1989) or promote ideological rather than theoretical and methodological conflicts (Lipset, 1994).

CONCLUSIONS

Few sociologists would disagree that the discipline was founded on the principle that the social world is subject to scientific study. But our students have many misconceptions of what it means to be scientific; and students attracted to the discipline, such as those in my research methods classes, often dissociate sociology from science. It is important, therefore, for sociology instructors to address the science question explicitly and forthrightly—in introductory as well as in methods and theory courses. The exercise introduced here offers one vehicle for doing this. By having students project their personal images of both scientists and social scientists and then reflect on the accuracy of those images, the exercise can generate a lively,
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wide-ranging discussion. Through this discussion, instructors can address three related questions: (1) What is science? (2) How is sociology scientific? and (3) What are the major challenges to sociology as a science?

Addressing these issues is important not only from the standpoint of educating our students. It also conveys to students what we as instructors believe to be important about the discipline. Recent critiques of both undergraduate and graduate training in sociology have lamented the de-emphasis of the discipline’s scientific underpinning. Citing the aforementioned TAGGE Report, Huber (1995) concluded that sociology’s position in the academy has been weakened by the denial of its status as a science. Markham (1995) noted the cursory treatment of research methods in introductory courses, from which students would hardly guess that research is one of sociologists’ central activities. Howery (1997) argued that we need to emphasize social scientific inquiry early and continuously in the curriculum. Addressing the “science” question is one way to initiate this infusion of inquiry into the curriculum.

FOOTNOTES

1 The course, methods of social research, is required for majors. Virtually all students were either second- or third-year sociology majors who had taken between one and five sociology courses, including introductory sociology, which was the only prerequisite. Approximately half the students also had taken or currently were enrolled in a required course in the development of social theory.

2 Whereas the tables present the percentage of each response category, the percentages reported here are based on the number of nonoverlapping responses.

3 In the context of a course in sociology, students tend to construe the term “social scientist” to mean “sociologist.” It is not surprising, therefore, that for the past three semesters I have found highly similar results using the word “sociologist” instead of “social scientist.”

4 Film and television no doubt have shaped the public view of science. Consistent with many of the student images reported here, analyses of television entertainment programming indicate that compared with other professionals, scientists tend to be portrayed as older and “stranger,” among the least sociable, and most likely to work alone. Moreover, these and other negative images are more likely to be held by heavy than light viewers (Gerbner, 1987).

REFERENCES


Markham, William T. “Research Methods in the Introductory Course: To Be or Not to Be?” *Teaching Sociology* 19:464-71.


