

SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY



SECOND EDITION

# CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL RESEARCH



CHARLES C. RAGIN  
LISA M. AMOROSO



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**CONSTRUCTING  
SOCIAL RESEARCH**

The Unity and Diversity of Method



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# What Is (and Is Not) Social Research?

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## Introduction

There are many ways to study and tell about social life. Sometimes it is hard to tell which of these are social research and which are not. Consider a few examples.

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo wrote a book, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (2001), in which she describes the recent expansion of domestic jobs in the United States. Her work focused particularly on Latina immigrants in Los Angeles. Hondagneu-Sotelo spoke at length with nannies, housekeepers, and house-cleaners about their experiences in entering and exiting paid domestic work, as well as the quality of their relationships with their employers. In addition, she spent a lot of time talking to employers, attorneys dealing in this area, and owners of domestic employment agencies. She also analyzed the results of a survey of over 150 domestic workers. One of her findings was that many Latina immigrants want to be viewed as individuals by their employers and to develop personal relationships with their employers, while many employers want to keep these workers at arm's length. By maintaining distance, the employers do not need to spend time or emotional energy on these employees, nor do they develop any sense of personal obligation to the worker. In addition, by maintaining this distance, the employers have more flexibility in controlling the employee or terminating the relationship. Hondagneu-Sotelo wrote about the experiences of Latina immigrants doing paid domestic work in order to bring to light some of the problems with this growing sector of the economy. She was motivated by her belief that this type of research will build understanding and appreciation, which may ultimately result in an "upgrading" of this form of employment.

Charles Clotfelter was interested in the process of school desegregation during the 50 years after Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren wrote the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision in 1954. In his book, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (2004), he considers the degree to which interracial contact has changed within and across school districts due to desegregation efforts. Unlike Hondagneu-Sotelo, Clotfelter does not interview people who were attending schools between 1954 and 2004; instead, his research relies on statistical analyses of school enrollment data. He concludes that desegregation efforts fell short for four reasons: "apparent white aversion to interracial contact, the multiplicity of means by which whites could sidestep the effects of the policy, the willingness of state and local governments to accommodate white resistance, and the faltering resolve of the prime movers of the policy" (p. 8). This lack of progress is due in part to the 1974 Supreme Court decision, *Milliken v. Bradley*, that ruled against cross-district busing as a required step in desegregation efforts. This ruling amounted to higher levels of segregation in the Midwest and

the Northeast where school districts are smaller than in other parts of the country, so whites could easily circumvent integration efforts by moving short distances. Thus, racial inequality decreased within public school districts but actually grew larger across districts. In the Northeast, in fact, segregation rose steadily from 1960 to 2000. School districts in the Northeast remain the most segregated districts in the nation.

In his book *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*, Steven Wilkinson (2004) examines why violence erupts in one town but not in other similar towns. He also considers the political incentives shaping the ways in which politicians in control of the police and army use these forces to quell or fuel Hindu–Muslim riots. Since the data needed to test possible explanations for these riots were not available, he and another researcher developed a database of 2,000 riots in India from 1950–1995. Along with his quantitative analysis of these riots, Wilkinson also compares three instances of communal violence in depth to better understand the institutional and political process influencing the occurrence or avoidance of violence. He found that politicians in local-level elections select and frame issues such that the chances of ethnic violence are increased. His findings on state-level elections challenge the prevailing idea that political instability and violence are the inevitable result of ethnic heterogeneity; increased levels of state-level competition among Hindu parties for votes increases the value of minority votes, thus giving state governments a political incentive to prevent anti-minority violence. Wilkinson asserts that his evidence demonstrates that violence is not “an inevitable by-product of electoral competition in plural societies” (p. 236). He is optimistic about the ability of democratic values and ethnically heterogeneous countries to coexist peacefully.

These books address important issues: What is the nature of work when the workplace is someone else’s home? What are the factors that are fueling the expansion of paid domestic work? What are the consequences of this expansion on the lives of immigrant women? In what ways has the U.S. school system succeeded in racial desegregation? In what ways has it failed, and why? What is the impact of democracy on ethnic conflict? To what degree do political campaigns influence ethnic violence? These questions and the studies that address them are as relevant to the everyday concerns of the informed public as they are to government officials responsible for formulating public policies. The conclusions of any of these three authors could be reported on a television news or magazine show such as *Nightline*, *60 Minutes*, or the *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*. The nature of the nanny–employer relationship could even be the basis for a talk show.

At first glance, it might appear that these three books were written by journalists or freelance writers. Yet all three were written by social researchers trying to make sense of different aspects of social life. What distinguishes these works as social research? More generally, what distinguishes social research from other ways of gathering and presenting evidence about social life? All those who write about society construct **representations** of social life—descriptions that incorporate relevant ideas and evidence about social phenomena. Are the representations constructed by social researchers distinctive in any way from those constructed by non–social scientists, and, if so, how?

At the most general level, **social research** includes everything involved in the efforts of social scientists to “tell about society” (Becker 2007). Both aspects of social research—that it involves a *social scientific way of telling about society*—are important. Telling about society has special features and some special problems. These problems affect the work of all those who tell about society, from social researchers to novelists to documentary filmmakers, and separate

those who tell about society and social life from those who tell about other things. Social researchers, like others who tell about society, are members of society. They study members of society, and they present the results of their work to members of society. Thus, at a very general level, social researchers overlap with those whom they study and with the audiences for their work, and those they study—other members of society—also overlap with their audiences.

Among those who consider themselves scientists, this three-way mixing of researcher, subject, and audience exists only in the social and behavioral sciences (anthropology, sociology, political science, and so on) and has an important impact on the nature and conduct of research. For example, it is very difficult to conduct social research without also addressing questions that are fundamentally interpretive or historical in nature—who we are and how we came to be who we are. It is very difficult to neutralize social science in some way and see studying people the same as studying molecules or ants.

The importance of the other part of the definition—that there is a specifically social scientific way of telling—stems from the fact already noted, that there are lots of people who tell about society. Journalists, for example, do most of the things that social scientists do. They try to collect accurate information (data), they try to organize and analyze the information they gather so that it all makes sense, and they report their conclusions in writing to an audience (typically, the general public). Do journalists conduct social research? Yes, they often do, but they are not considered social scientists. It is important to contrast social research with a variety of other activities so that the special features of the social scientific way of representing social life are clear.

### **Social Research Defined**

Social research is one among many ways of constructing representations of social life—of telling about society. It is the product of the efforts of an individual (or group of individuals) that addresses socially significant phenomena, engages directly or indirectly with ideas or social theory, incorporates large amounts of appropriate evidence that has been purposefully collected, and results from systematic analysis of this evidence.

The main concern of this chapter is what is and what is not social research. We first examine conventional answers to the question of the distinctiveness of social research. Most of these conventional answers are too restrictive—too many social researchers are excluded by these answers. Next, we compare social research to some other ways of telling about society to illustrate important similarities and differences. Too often, social researchers are portrayed as ivory tower academics poring over their facts and figures. In fact, social researchers are quite diverse. Some have a lot in common with freelance writers; others are more like laboratory scientists. Finally, we argue that it is important to focus on how social researchers construct their representations of social life for their audiences, especially for other social scientists. By examining the nature of the representations that social researchers construct, it is possible to see the distinctive features of social research—the social scientific way of representing social life.

## **Some Conventional Views of Social Research**

There are three conventional answers to the question, “Does social research constitute a distinctive way of telling about society?” The first argues that social scientists have a special way of defining *society*, and this makes social research distinctive. The second asserts that social research relies heavily on the *language of variables* and *relationships among variables* and that this special language sets social scientists apart. The third emphasizes the use of the *scientific method* and the consequent similarities between the social sciences and natural sciences like physics and chemistry. All three conventional answers offer interesting insights into how social scientists construct social research, yet none of these answers sets social research apart from other ways of telling about society.

## Do Social Researchers Have a Special Way of Defining Society?

One reason social research has so many close relatives, such as journalism and documentary filmmaking, is that many different kinds of work involve telling about society. Can we distinguish social researchers from others who tell about social life and social events by giving the term *society* a special meaning for social researchers? Or can we do so by showing that social scientists all use the term *society* in a special way?

**Society** could be used to refer to all inhabitants of a nation (for example, all people living in Peru). Social research would then involve making statements about whole countries. For example, a social researcher might show that Peruvians are more acquisitive or more tolerant than people in other countries. Another might show that the occupational rewards for educational achievement are better in Germany than in most other advanced countries. To understand social research in this way is to see countries as the fundamental unit of social scientific knowledge.

The problem with this way of restricting the definition of social research is that very few of the people who call themselves social researchers make statements that are so broad. Some social researchers study the social relations of a single individual. For example, in *Working Knowledge*, Douglas Harper (1987) examined the social world of a single rural handyman (see also Shaw 1930). Some social researchers use their lives as the basis for their analysis of social relationships, such as Betsy Lucal (1999) in her work on the implications of gender misattribution during social interactions. Even those who examine whole countries readily admit that in every country there is great social diversity—that many different “social worlds” exist side by side, entwined and overlapping.

Social researchers also acknowledge that they don’t have a good working definition of the term *society*. When U.S. citizens visit Canada for an extended period, are they no longer members of “U.S.” society? Is there a separate Canadian society or only a single American society, embracing both Canada and the United States? What about Native Americans or the Amish? And what about Mexico or Quebec? While it is tempting to equate nation-states and societies—and many social scientists routinely do this—it is a hazardous practice. Most of the entities that might be called societies transcend national boundaries.

Alternatively, society might be restricted to *formal properties* of human organization and interaction. A **formal property** is a generic feature or pattern that can exist in many different settings. When only two people interact, they form a dyad; when three people interact, they form a triad; and so on. As the sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) noted a long time ago, dyads and other basic forms of association have special features, regardless of where they are found. This is what makes them “formal” or “generic” properties.

For example, forming a business partnership with another person, a dyad, has a lot of the

same qualities as getting married, another dyad. The relationship is both intense and fragile and typically involves many mutual obligations and rights. Thus, group size is a formal property. Interaction patterns are different in small and large groups, regardless of setting. Degree of hierarchy is also a formal property of human organization. *Hierarchy*—the regulation, management, or domination of many by a few—is another key feature of human social life (Michels 1959). Organizations and groups that are more hierarchical differ systematically from those that are “flatter”—again, regardless of setting.

While formal properties are important, and almost no one other than social researchers studies them in depth, the investigation of formal properties today constitutes only a relatively small portion of all social research. Many of the things that interest social researchers and their audiences are important, not because of their generic features such as their size or their degree of hierarchy, but because of their historical or cultural significance.

It is of special importance to Americans, for example, that some hierarchies overlap with racial differences. One overlap is in education: Schools with a larger percentage of nonwhite students have significantly fewer resources, ranging from larger class sizes to less qualified teachers to fewer college preparatory courses (such as calculus), than schools with predominantly white students. Such overlapping hierarchies are historically rooted, and they are the focus of frequent and intense political debate. These and many other topics of great importance to social researchers and their audiences cannot be addressed as generic features of human social organization. It is difficult to neutralize their social and political significance, to sanitize them, and treat them as abstract, formal properties. If one did succeed in this type of exercise in abstraction, important information would be lost in the process.

## What Is Society?

Society is best understood as *social life*, which, in turn, can be understood in simple and conventional terms as *people doing things together* (Becker 2007). Telling about society basically involves studying how and why people do things together. They make and unmake families and firms; they join and leave neighborhoods and religious congregations; they resist authority; they form political parties and factions within them; they go on strike; they organize revolutions; they make peace, they have fun, and they rob gas stations. Historical events and trends (for example, the Islamic revolutions in West Africa or declining rates of childbearing in 19th-century France) are examples of people doing things together. The list is endless. People doing things together is sometimes history making; more often, it is ordinary, everyday, unrecorded social life. Social scientists study all kinds of social activity. Some prefer to study the ordinary; others prefer to study the momentous.

While it may seem contradictory, the category “people doing things together” also includes people *refusing* to do things together (see Scott 1990). For example, when someone decides not to vote in an election because she dislikes all the candidates or is disillusioned with the whole electoral process, a non-action (that is, not voting) has a social character. Not voting, in this light, is intentional and thus can be viewed as an accomplishment. It has a clear and interpretable basis and meaning in everyday social life.

Many refusals are clear acts of defiance (Scott 1976, 1990). The prison inmate who starves himself to protest inhuman conditions may seem contradictory or self-destructive, but his body may be his only possible arena for self-assertion in a setting that imposes such severe restrictions. An apolitical act of suicide, which at first glance seems very personal and individual,

is the ultimate refusal to do things together and thus falls well within the purview of social research. Émile Durkheim (1951), an early French sociologist, was one of the very first social scientists to argue that such refusals are inherently social. They have social causes, social consequences, and social meaning.

The category “people doing things together” and its companion category “refusals” encompass a broad range of phenomena. This breadth is necessary because a close examination of the work of social researchers shows that their topics are diverse and almost unbounded. This working definition of society does little, however, to distinguish social research from other ways of telling about society.

## Do Social Researchers Use a Special Language?

Alternatively, it might be possible to distinguish social research from other ways of telling about society by the *language* that social researchers use when they tell about society (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg 1955). Some social researchers argue that when they tell about society they use the language of variables and relationships among variables to describe patterns, and that this language distinguishes social research from other ways of telling about society. (This general approach is discussed in detail in [Chapter 7](#).)

For example, a social researcher might argue that the most racially segregated cities in the United States have the worst public schools (or, conversely, that the least racially segregated cities have the best public schools). This statement expresses a **relationship** between two variables, degree of racial segregation and quality of public schools.

More generally, a **variable** is some general feature or aspect (such as degree of racial segregation) that differs from one case to the next within a particular set (such as cities in the United States). Variables link abstract *concepts* with specific *measures*. In the example, the researcher might believe that the key to having good public schools in racially mixed cities is a high level of *interracial interaction*. The **concept** of interracial interaction, like most concepts, is very general and can be applied in a variety of ways to very different settings (for example, countries, cities, shopping malls, bus stops, high schools, and so on). One way to apply this concept to racially mixed cities is through the variable *racial segregation* (the degree to which different races live in their own, separate neighborhoods).

A **measure** is a specific way a variable is quantified (or measured). Most variables can be measured in a variety of ways. For example, “percentage of a city’s population living in racially homogeneous neighborhoods” is one possible measure of racial segregation. The higher this percentage is, the greater the segregation. Another possible measure of segregation is the **index of qualitative variation (IQV)**. IQV is a measure that captures the dispersion of cases across categorical variables (such as race and ethnicity) ranging from complete homogeneity to maximal diversity. IQV is 1.0 when there is the maximum amount of diversity possible (so if there are five possible categories, then 20% of the cases fall into each category). At the other extreme, IQV is 0.0 when there is no diversity (100% of the cases fall into just one category). There are many other, more sophisticated measures of racial segregation (see Massey and Denton 1993). Quantitative researchers have to select from among the available measures or develop new ones; they also may have to justify the specific measures they use for each variable.

To see if it is true that the most racially segregated cities have the worst public schools, it would be necessary to measure both variables, the degree of racial segregation and the quality of the public schools, in each city. The quality of public schools might be measured by average

scores on standardized tests, graduation rates, or some other measure. Once the two variables are measured, it would be possible to assess the link between them—these two attributes of cities in the United States. Is there a correspondence? Is it true that the cities that are more racially integrated have better public schools? Is it true that the worst public schools are in the most racially segregated cities? In other words, do these two features of cities vary together, or “covary”? Social researchers use the term **covariation** to describe a general pattern of correspondence.

Examining the covariation between two features across a set of **cases** (racial segregation and quality of public schools across U.S. cities) is the most common way of assessing the relationship between two variables. When we say that two variables are related, we are asserting that there is some pattern of covariation. If we found the expected pattern of covariation across U.S. cities (high levels of racial segregation paired with poor public schools and low levels of racial segregation paired with good public schools), then we could say that these two variables covary and we would use quantitative methods (see [Chapter 7](#)) to assess the strength of their correspondence. Social researchers calculate *correlations* in order to assess the *strength* of a pattern of covariation.

Just because two variables covary across a set of cases does not *necessarily* mean that one is the **cause** of the other. However, a pattern of systematic covariation can be offered as evidence in support of the idea or proposition that there is some sort of causal connection between them. The language of variables and relationships among variables provides a powerful shorthand for describing general patterns of correspondence. In this example, evidence on many cities can be condensed into a single number, a **correlation**, describing the strength of the covariation between two measures (see [Chapter 7](#)).

It is true that the language of variables and relationships among variables peppers the discourse of most social research. However, there are many who do not use this language. For example, a researcher might chart the history of a declining public school system and include consideration of the impact of racial segregation and other racial factors without resorting directly to the language of variables and relationships. This examination would focus on the unfolding of events—who did what, and when, why, and how.

Similarly, systematic observation (that is, fieldwork) in a single, failing school might be the focus of another social researcher’s investigation. This work, like the historical study, might not entail explicit use of the language of variables and relationships. Instead, it might center on an effort to uncover and represent “what it’s like” to be a student or a teacher at this school. This understanding, in turn, might help determine whether there is a link between racial segregation and the quality of public schools.

Some social researchers try to avoid using the language of variables and relationships among variables altogether. They believe that this language interferes with their attempts to make sense of social life, especially when the goal of the research is to understand how something came to be the way it is (that is, conduct research on historical origins) or to understand something as an experience (that is, conduct research on how people view their lives and their social worlds).

While some social scientists avoid using the language of variables, many *non*-social scientists use it regularly. Social researchers do not have a monopoly on the understanding of social life through variables and their relations. Many journalists use this language, for example, when they discuss differences from one situation to the next or when they talk about social trends and problems. For instance, a journalist discussing a recent outbreak of violence in a major city might note that cities with more serious drug problems also have higher rates of violent crime.

Policymakers and others who routinely consume the writing of social scientists also use this language. Even politicians and ministers use it, especially when they warn of dark days ahead or the current trends that are ushering in unwanted or dangerous changes.

In addition, the language of variables and relationships among variables is not a special language. This way of describing social life crops up often in everyday life. For example, we may say that we learn more in smaller classes, or that we enjoy athletic events more when the game is close, or that families living in rural areas are more closely knit, or that local politicians address real issues while national politicians address made-for-TV issues. In each example, two variables are related. The first, for instance, argues that how much students learn (a variable that can be quantified with standardized tests) is influenced by another measurable variable, class size. This way of describing and understanding social life is in no way the special province of social scientists or social research.

### Does the Scientific Method Make Social Research Distinctive?

The third conventional answer to the question of what makes social research distinctive is the idea that social researchers follow the “scientific method,” while most of the others who tell about society, like journalists, do not. This answer makes social research seem a lot more like research in the natural sciences such as physics. Progress in these fields is driven primarily by **experiments**, often conducted in laboratories. If social research can claim to follow the same general scientific plan as these natural sciences, then it gains some of their legitimacy as purveyors of scientific truths. At least, this is the thinking of those who argue that the use of the scientific method distinguishes social research from other ways of telling about society.

The core of the scientific method concerns the formulation and **testing of hypotheses**. A **hypothesis** is best understood as an educated guess about what the investigator expects to find in a particular set of evidence. It is an “educated” guess in the sense that it is based on the investigator’s knowledge of the phenomenon he or she is studying and on his or her understanding of relevant ideas or *social theories* (see discussion of social theory below). Social researchers often develop hypotheses by studying the writings and research of other social scientists. These writings include not only research on a given topic but also relevant theoretical works. Social scientists use these writings in combination with whatever they know or can learn about their research subject to formulate hypotheses. These hypotheses are most often formulated as propositions about the expected relationship between two or more variables across a particular set or **category** of cases.

Generally, a hypothesis involves the **deduction** of a specific proposition or expectation from a general theoretical argument or perspective. It is a mental act, based on existing knowledge. For example, a researcher might be interested in the impact of occupation on voting behavior, especially the political differences between industrial workers who interact only with machines compared to those who must interact with other workers to coordinate production. In addition to the many studies of voting behavior, the researcher might also consult Karl Marx’s (1867/1976) ideas about work and class consciousness presented in his three-volume work, *Das Kapital*; Max Weber’s (1922/1978) ideas about social class in *Economy and Society*; and the ideas of contemporary scholars such as Seymour Lipset (1982), Erik Wright (1985), and Michèle Lamont (2002). After consulting all the relevant studies and theoretical writings, the researcher might derive a specific hypothesis: that industrial workers who interact more with machines vote less often than industrial workers who interact with other workers on the job, but when they do vote,

they vote more consistently for the Democratic Party.

After formulating a hypothesis, social researchers collect relevant data and then use them to test the hypothesis. The test usually involves an examination of patterns in the data to see if they match up well with the patterns predicted by the hypothesis. Analysis of the data may refute or support the hypothesis. Typically, analysis of the data also suggests revisions of the hypothesis that could be explored in a future study.

Information to test the hypothesis just described could be collected in a variety of ways (for example, via telephone interviews, mailed questionnaires, and so on). Once collected, the researcher could use statistical methods to test the hypothesis. The researcher would compare the two categories of industrial workers with respect to their different voting histories—how often they voted and who they voted for—to see if there are substantial differences between the two groups in the ways predicted by the hypothesis.

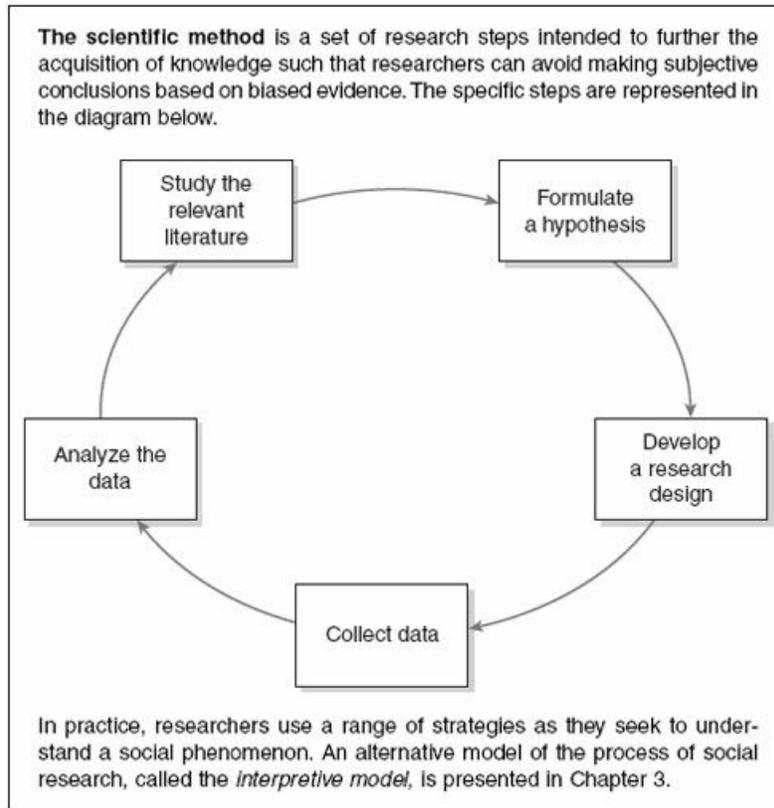
The examination of the data has important implications for the ideas used to generate the hypothesis. On the basis of the newly collected evidence, for example, the researcher might conclude that these ideas need serious adjustment. The use of evidence to formulate or reformulate general ideas is called **induction**. Induction is a process whereby the implications of evidence, especially new evidence combined with existing evidence, for general ideas are assessed.

In the **scientific method**, deduction and induction work together. The hypothesis is derived from theory and from existing knowledge about the research subject. Data relevant to the hypothesis are assembled or collected, and the correctness of the hypothesis is assessed. The new knowledge that is generated through these efforts can then be used, through the process of induction, to extend, refine, or reformulate existing ideas. In short, deduction starts with general ideas and applies them to evidence; induction starts with evidence and assesses their implication for general ideas.

**Figure 1.1** shows the specific steps dictated by the scientific method. At the end of a research project, when the data analysis is complete, the data support or refute the hypothesis. Then the cycle begins again. The scientific method works best when different theories can be used to deduce competing hypotheses. When diametrically opposed hypotheses are deduced from two or more theories, the analysis of relevant data provides a decisive, or “critical,” test of opposing arguments. Both theories can’t be supported by the same data if they make opposite predictions.

For example, if one theory predicts that national economies subject to *more* government regulation (rules and restrictions on what businesses can do) should have higher economic growth rates when world trade slumps, and a second theory predicts that national economies subject to *less* government regulation should fare better under these conditions, then examination of relevant data on national economies should permit a decisive test of these competing arguments.

**Figure 1.1** The Scientific Method



While there are many social researchers who use the scientific method as described here, there are also many who do not. For example, some social scientists (see, for example, Smith 1987) believe that the most important thing a social scientist can do is to give *voice* to **marginalized groups**—to tell the stories of those who have been shoved aside by the rest of society (see Chapter 2).

For example, Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (2003) got to know the drag queens from a club in Key West, the 801 Cabaret, over the course of 3 years by talking with them, attending their performances, and even participating in the shows themselves. The greater the role of pre-existing theories and ideas in a project of this sort, the more the voices of the research subjects are blocked by the trappings of natural science imposed on an elusive social phenomenon. The voices of the subjects are lost as the loudspeaker of social science theory drowns out all competitors. This reasoning is inconsistent with the logic of the scientific method, which emphasizes the testing of hypotheses.

It is also worth noting that it is not easy to follow the scientific method in social research, even when the goal of the researcher is strict adherence to this framework. Most social scientific theories are abstract, vague, and inconsistent, and it is difficult to deduce clear hypotheses from them. Sometimes a theory is so vaguely formulated that it is possible to deduce contradictory arguments from the same theory.

Furthermore, when analyses of the data used to test a hypothesis do not support it, most researchers are reluctant to conclude that the theory they are testing is wrong. Instead, they usually point to inadequacies in the data, to the impossibility of measuring social phenomena with precision, or to some other practical problem. Finally, social researchers are often known to search their data for interesting patterns, regardless of what was hypothesized. This process of

discovery generally makes better use of a data set than strict adherence to the requirements of the scientific method (Diesing 1971).

Like others who tell about society, most social researchers devote their energies to trying to make sense of social life using whatever procedures and strategies seem most useful and appropriate for the questions they address. They worry less about following the strict dictates of the scientific method in their efforts to construct well-grounded representations of social life. Thus, there is no single “method” used by social scientists. In [Chapter 3](#), we discuss an alternative to the scientific method called the *interpretive model*. This alternative model encompasses a much broader range of the types of activity researchers engage in when conducting social research.

To summarize the discussion of conventional views of the distinctiveness of social research, social researchers don’t have one special way of defining society that they all agree on, nor do they have one special way of telling about it. While many social researchers respect the scientific method, not all follow its prescribed steps strictly, and some ignore its steps altogether. It is true that social researchers have tried harder than others to define society and social life, they *do* tend to use the language of variables and relationships among variables more than anyone else, and many of them *do* test hypotheses according to systematic rules. But these are not *defining features* of social research; they are better seen as *tendencies* of social research.

## **Social Research and Other Ways of Representing Social Life**

Novelists and other writers, journalists, documentary photographers and filmmakers, and a host of others, in addition to social researchers, construct representations that “tell about society.” They all address the subtleties of social life—people doing or refusing to do things together. Is it possible to distinguish social researchers from these other people who also tell about society?

Consider documentary filmmakers first. In some ways, the makers of documentaries seem more concerned than social researchers with constructing valid representations of social life. When social researchers represent society, they often use tables and charts that condense and simplify the vast amount of evidence they have collected. When a researcher states, for example, that people with more education tend to be more politically tolerant, the conclusion may summarize information on thousands of people canvassed in a survey. Or social researchers may select a quote or two to illustrate a conclusion based on an analysis of hundreds of hours of taped, face-to-face interviews. In almost all social scientific representations of social life, the social researcher explains in detail his or her *interpretation* of the evidence used in the representation.

Documentary filmmakers, by contrast, try to present much of their evidence up front, often without commenting directly on its meaning or significance. While it is true that filmmakers select which clips to show and then arrange them in sequence, the representation itself is made up of actual recordings. Also, many documentary filmmakers avoid injecting verbal or written interpretations of the evidence that is presented. Thus, while documentary films, like all representations of social life, are constructed in ways that reflect the goals and intentions of their makers, these representations often have less interpretation of the evidence, and in most instances they display a higher proportion of all the primary evidence collected than representations produced by social researchers. Viewers of documentary films are sometimes left to draw their own conclusions from the representation. Social researchers, by contrast, usually

state their conclusions openly, and they carefully organize their representations around these clearly stated conclusions.

At the other extreme, consider the work of novelists. Some novelists strive to write stories that are as realistic as possible. They create fiction, but their fictions are believable representations of social life, representations that often strike at the core of what it means to live in a complex social world. Imagine a novelist concerned about race in the South. She bases her novel on her experience of race relations as a child growing up in the Deep South in the 1950s. She wants to capture, as much as possible, the essence of what it was like. Much of the book might be based on actual experiences—true events—but much of it might be pure fiction as well—events fabricated by the author. Yet this fictional account might do a much better job of capturing the essence of what it was actually like to live in the South during this period than a careful recounting of true events. In short, by creating fiction, the novelist might do a better job of capturing the reality, the true character of race during this period, than she might if she were to present a straight history of relevant childhood events.

At one extreme, a documentary film is a representation based on recorded slices of social life. At the other extreme is the novel, the creation of insightful fiction. Both ways of representing social life have important strengths that are only rarely found in social research. In some ways, social research may seem ineffective when compared to these other, more dramatic approaches.

But we really don't expect to find these qualities in social research. We don't expect social researchers to present mounds of data. In fact, the social researcher who simply presents mounds of data is considered a failure because the work is not complete. Likewise, we do not want social researchers to create deliberate fictions to enhance the points they want to make. The social researcher who knowingly presents fiction as truth is considered dishonest and, if discovered, will be charged with violating professional ethics (see [Chapter 4](#)).

From the perspective of most social researchers, the representation of social life offered in a novel is overprocessed compared to social science because the representation goes far beyond the evidence. The representations constructed by social researchers are more processed and condensed than those offered in documentary films and less processed than those created in novels. At least, this is the happy medium that most social researchers strive for—to go beyond raw data and provide a clear interpretation of the evidence, but stop well short of fiction.

In this respect, social research is a lot like journalism. Journalists process and condense information about social life, but they also try to avoid manufacturing fiction. Among the many ways of telling about society that could be compared to social research, journalism offers the closest and most fruitful comparison.

## Journalism and Social Research: The Similarities

Journalists write about what's going on in society; they represent social life. Most often they report on current events, but they also write stories that offer historical perspectives and in-depth interpretations. Journalists also address major trends and social problems, not just the news of the day, and sometimes these reports are very similar to the research reports of social scientists. Also like social researchers, journalists develop special topic areas: Some focus on political events, economic trends, or women's issues; some report on everyday life; some analyze major international events and issues; and so on. Virtually all aspects of social life fall within the purview of journalism. If people will read about a topic, journalists will report on it.

Regardless of topic, journalists all face the same problem regarding "evidence" or "facts."

This problem parallels that of social researchers facing “data.” Like social researchers, journalists collect an enormous amount of information that, potentially at least, might become evidence for a report. They have to decide which of this information is relevant as evidence and then identify the most pertinent bits. This process of gathering and selecting evidence goes hand-in-hand with developing the focus of the investigation and the report. As the report becomes more of a finished product—as it coalesces in the mind of the journalist as a story—the collection of evidence becomes more focused and more selective. Initial ideas become leads, some leads bear fruit and are pursued vigorously, and the story takes shape. In the process, much potential evidence and many potential stories are left behind.

The same holds true for social research. Social scientists must select from the vast amount of information that social life offers and construct their representations from carefully selected bits and slices. Data collection (that is, the process of gathering evidence) is necessarily selective, and becomes much more so as an investigation progresses. The researcher may start with a few ideas (for example, sensitizing concepts; see [Chapter 5](#)) and maybe a working hypothesis or two. These ideas determine the initial data collection efforts. As more is learned about the subject, either through data collection or data analysis, the research becomes more focused and fewer avenues are kept open. As the results take shape in the mind of the investigator, much of what was initially thought to be important is cast aside as irrelevant.

Both social researchers and journalists find that, in the end, much of the evidence they collected at the start of the investigation was based on false leads, and that they could have been much more efficient in their collection of evidence if only they had known at the start what they learned toward the end of the investigation. The collection of evidence is necessarily selective because potentially there is an infinite quantity of evidence. However, both journalists and social researchers find that in the end they cannot use all the evidence they have collected.

There is great danger in both journalism and social research that follows from this need for **selective gathering of evidence**. Sometimes what may be a false lead is not recognized as such, and it may become the focus or at least an important part of the investigation. False leads pose serious problems in both journalism and social research because they may be biased by accepted knowledge; stereotypes; and common, everyday understandings of social life. For example, there are two common images of the African American male—the dangerous, inner-city ghetto teenager and the upwardly mobile young professional. As Mitchell Duneier points out in *Slim’s Table* (1992), both of these images are media creations and have little to do with the lives of most African American men. Research or journalism that uses these images as starting points will fail to arrive at valid representations of the experiences of African American males.

Another problem is the simple fact that people questioned or studied by a journalist or a social researcher may unconsciously or deliberately seek to deceive those who study them. Both social researchers and journalists strive to get valid evidence. For journalists, this effort is often described as reporting “just the facts” or at least trying to balance different views of the same facts. Journalists check different sources against each other and maintain constant vigilance in their efforts to detect deception. After all, interested parties may have a lot to gain if their version of “the facts” is accepted by a journalist and then reported as the one true version.

While social researchers are less often the target of outright deception, like journalists they must deal with bias, distortion, faulty memories, and cover-up. For example, while it might seem a simple matter to determine the percentage of gay men among adult men in the United States, social researchers have come up with a range of answers, from 2% to about 10%. (These estimates are discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 7](#).) There are various reasons for this wide

range; one of them is people's reluctance to discuss their sexual behavior openly.

"Social facts" can be as elusive as bias-free journalism. Thus, the two fields have comparable obsessions with "truth," or **validity** as it is known to social researchers. For journalism, this concern is expressed in a concern for reporting only verifiable information. Thus, journalists are very concerned with "fact checking" and with the authority of their sources of information.

Social researchers' concern for validity is seen in their efforts to verify that their data collection and measurement procedures work the way they claim. Researchers attempting to determine the percentage of adult gay men in the United States, to follow the example above, would have to contend with a variety of threats to the validity of their measurement procedures. People with more varied sex lives, for example, are generally more likely to agree to talk about their sex lives or to fill out questionnaires on their sexual behavior. This **bias** would surely increase the size of the estimate of the percentage of adult gay men based on survey data. Thus, researchers would have to find some way to address this threat to the validity of their measurement procedures and their estimate of the percentage of adult gay men.

Another similarity between journalists and social researchers is that they must analyze and arrange evidence before they can offer their representations of social life for wider consumption (for example, as news or research reports). As evidence is gathered and selected, the investigator tries to make sense of it. Ongoing analysis of the evidence simplifies the task of what to collect next. Once the gathering and selecting of evidence is complete, the *analysis* of evidence intensifies. A thorough analysis of evidence, in both journalism and social research, is an important preliminary step to arranging it for presentation in a report.

When social life is represented, both social researchers and journalists make connections in their data. When a journalist reconstructs the story of a political scandal, for example, connections and timing are crucially important to the representation of the scandal. It matters who said or did what and when. The goal of analysis is to make these connections. In social research, connections are often *causal* in nature. An analysis of a decaying section of a city, for example, might focus on the long-term economic and social forces responsible for the decline.

Journalists analyze their evidence to make sure that the proper connections are made; then they arrange the evidence for presentation in a report. Readers want to know the big picture—the journalist's final synthesis of the evidence, and not all the bits of evidence that the journalist collected along the way before arriving at a synthesis. It is the same with social research. It isn't possible to include all the evidence the social researcher collected when reporting conclusions. The evidence that is represented in a research report is a select subset of the evidence collected, which of course is a select subset of the vast volume of potential evidence.

The similarities between the work of journalists and the work of social researchers are striking. Of necessity, they both selectively gather evidence relevant to specific questions, analyze it, and then select a subset of the evidence they have gathered for reporting. The report itself is an attempt to construct for the reader the investigator's conclusions regarding the evidence. Evidence is arranged and condensed in a way that illustrates the investigator's conclusions. In effect, the reader is presented with the investigator's arrangement of a fraction of the evidence the investigator collected, a small fraction of the potential evidence. Thus, in both social research and journalism, representations of social life (the end products of efforts to tell about society) are condensed descriptions structured according to the investigator's ideas. These representations emerge from a systematic dialogue between the investigator's ideas and evidence.

## How Social Research Differs

Journalists write for wide audiences, usually for the literate public as a whole. They hope to reach as many people as possible. The primary audience for social researchers, by contrast, is social scientists and other professionals. Many social researchers hope to reach, eventually, the literate public with their findings and their ideas. Some social researchers, including policy researchers, engage in research to have a direct impact on society. They seek to influence and inform contemporary public debates and seek a broader audience for their work. For example, policy researchers are primarily concerned with factors that can be manipulated by public policy and therefore are more likely to be of interest to policymakers. These researchers frame their work so it directly addresses policy alternatives and makes recommendations about policy interventions, revisions, or removals. But most social researchers expect to reach these general audiences indirectly—through the work of others such as journalists and freelance writers who use the work and the ideas of social researchers.

The importance of this difference can be seen clearly in the work of social scientists who write for several different target audiences. When their primary audience is social scientists and other professionals, they emphasize, among other things, technical aspects of their research and its place in a specific research literature—that is, its relation to the work of others who have researched the same or similar topics. When these same researchers write for the general public, however, they usually skip over technical aspects of the research and the discussion of the work of others (research literatures), focusing instead on the relevance of their own research findings to the concerns of the general public.

The point is not that the nature of the target audience shapes the nature of the representation, although this is certainly an important consideration. Rather, it is pinpointing the distinctiveness of the social scientific way of representing social life. The *distinctiveness* of the social scientific way of telling about society is most apparent when representations of social life produced by social scientists *for* social scientists are examined, especially given the fact that social scientists consider it their professional responsibility to monitor and evaluate the quality of each other's representations. It is important, therefore, to address how social researchers construct these representations.

What makes a representation of social life especially relevant to a social scientist? Briefly, social scientific audiences expect social scientific representations to

- Address phenomena that are socially significant in some way;
- Be relevant to social theory, either directly or indirectly;
- Be based on or incorporate large amounts of appropriate evidence, purposefully collected; and
- Result from some form of systematic analysis of this evidence.

While *some* of these features are found in *many* journalistic representations of social life, *all four* features are commonly found together in most social scientific representations. Because social scientific representations of social life have these four features, they tend to be better grounded in *ideas* and *evidence* than other kinds of representations. Ultimately, it is their strong grounding in ideas and evidence that makes these representations especially relevant to social scientists.

### Social Researchers Address Phenomena That Are Socially Significant

Many of the things that social researchers address are socially significant simply because they are general. Social scientists address all kinds of rates and percentages, for example, used to characterize large numbers of people (the homicide rate, the percentage of voters, and so on), and they study variations in these rates (for example, why some groups murder more than others, why some groups vote more than others, and so on). Sometimes rates and percentages are compared across whole countries (for example, rates of infant mortality in Asian versus Latin American countries). While a single murder might be relevant to theory in some way, common acts are more often studied across large populations, as rates and percentages.

However, it is not simply generality and the possibility of studying rates that make phenomena socially significant. Some phenomena are significant not because they are common, but because they are rare, unusual, or extreme in some way. A researcher might study a business, for example, that attempts to maintain a completely egalitarian structure, with no one giving orders to anyone else. How do they get things done? Or a researcher might study a country with great ethnic and cultural diversity but little ethnic conflict. Why is ethnic competition absent? Another researcher might study a poor immigrant group that assimilated quickly and overcame extreme prejudice while achieving breathtaking economic gains. How did they do it when so many other groups have struggled and failed? Finally, another researcher might study women who dress and pass as men. What do they gain? What do they lose?

These phenomena are worth studying because they are uncommon. However, they are studied not simply because of their interest value, but because they are relevant to how social researchers think about what is more common and thus challenge their basic assumptions about social life.

Social phenomena may also be selected for study because of their historical significance. An understanding of slavery, for example, is vitally important to the understanding and interpretation of race in the United States today. Similarly, an understanding of the relations between the United States and its Latin American neighbors, Mexico and Puerto Rico especially, is central to an understanding of Hispanic Americans. One key to understanding post–World War II U.S. society is the “A-bomb” and other nuclear weapons and the collective perception of their destructive potential. Our thinking about the military and military life in general is strongly influenced by the experience of the Vietnam War; the First Gulf War; and, more recently, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In short, many different aspects of our history have an impact on who we are today. It is difficult to know and understand American society without exploring the impact of its history.

## Social Researchers Connect Their Work to Social Theory

Social scientific representations of social life almost always address social theory in some way: A study of homicide rates is relevant to theories of social conflict. A study of women who dress and pass as men is relevant to theories that address gender differences and power. But what is social theory?

Most social scientists participate, in one way or another, in a set of loosely connected, ongoing conversations about abstract ideas with other social scientists and social thinkers. These conversations address basic features and processes of social life and seek to answer enduring questions. Such conversations started before any of today’s social scientists were born and more than likely will continue long after they have all died. While they often focus on abstract social concepts that have been around a long time (such as the concept of equality, for instance, or the

concept of society), they also shift over time, sometimes taking up new topics (gender and power, for example), sometimes returning to old topics (for example, the degree to which a group's culture can change in the absence of significant changes in material conditions such as level of technology).

These long-term, ongoing conversations provide a background for the development of specific social theories that are spelled out in the research process. A **social theory** is an attempt to specify as clearly as possible a set of ideas that pertain to a particular phenomenon or set of phenomena. Clarity is important because social theory guides research. Sometimes the ideas that make up a theory are expressed clearly at the start of a research project in the form of specific assumptions, concepts, and relationships. Research that seeks to follow the plan of the scientific method needs such clarity from the start. The researcher uses theory as a basis for formulating a specific hypothesis that is then tested with data especially collected for the test.

Sometimes, however, ideas are clarified in the course of the research. This approach is common in research that seeks to use evidence to formulate new ideas. Consider the social researcher who studies something a journalist might study, a new religious cult. More than likely, the researcher will compare this cult to a variety of other cults and in this way show the relevance of the cult to theories of religion. By contrast, a journalist might simply focus on the bizarre or unusual practices that set this cult apart from the rest of society.

The social researcher might also question the label “religious cult.” Suppose the cult was also very successful at marketing a particular product, something produced by its members (see Zablocki 1980). Is it a cult, or is it a new type of business enterprise? Which set of social theories, those addressing religious cults or those addressing economic organizations, is more useful when trying to understand this group? What are the implications of this group for either set of theories? In most social research, there is a clear *dialogue* with social theory that is an essential part of the research process (see [Chapter 3](#)).

## Social Researchers Use Large Amounts of Purposefully Collected Evidence

Most social researchers summarize mountains of evidence in the representations they construct. Social researchers tend to incorporate a lot of in-depth information about a limited number of cases (as in much **qualitative research**) or a limited amount of information about a large number of cases (as in most **quantitative research**) in their representations. Either way, they collect a lot of data. When social researchers construct representations, they try to incorporate as much of this evidence as possible, either by condensing and summarizing it or by highlighting the essential features of the cases they study.

The audiences for social research expect representations to summarize large amounts of evidence. In journalism, investigation is often focused on fact checking—making sure that each piece of a story is correct. Social researchers, by contrast, usually focus on the “weight” of the evidence. For example, in survey research, the investigator expects some respondents to make mistakes when they try to recall how they voted in the last election. Such mistakes are not fatal because the investigator is interested primarily in broad tendencies in the data—in the average voter or in the tendencies of broad categories of voters, such as, “Do richer respondents tend to vote more often for Republican candidates?” Social researchers *do* strive for precision—they try to get the facts right, but when they construct representations, their primary concern is to present a synthesis of the facts that both makes sense and is true to the evidence.

While large amounts of evidence are incorporated into most social scientific representations,

it is important to recognize that the evidence used is *purposefully collected*. In much social research, investigators put together a specific **research design**. A research design is a plan for collecting and analyzing evidence that will make it possible for the investigator to answer whatever questions he or she has posed. The design of an investigation touches almost all aspects of the research. The important ones to consider here are those that pertain to social scientists' use of large amounts of purposefully collected evidence. These include the following:

1. **Data collection technique.** Social researchers use a variety of different techniques: observation, interviewing, participating in activities, use of telephone and other types of surveys, collection of official statistics or historical archives, use of census materials and other evidence collected by governments, records of historical events, and so on. The choice of data collection technique is in large part shaped by the nature of the research question. All these techniques can yield enormous amounts of evidence.

2. **Sampling.** In most research situations, investigators confront a staggering surplus of data, and they often need to devise strategies for sampling the available data. The survey researcher who wants to study racial differences in voting does not need to know every voter's preference, just enough to make an accurate assessment of tendencies. A **random sample** of 1,000 voters might be sufficient. A researcher who wants to study how protest demonstrations have changed over the last 20 years based on an in-depth investigation of 50 such demonstrations must develop a strategy for selecting which 50 to study.

3. **Sample selection bias.** Whenever researchers use only a subset of the potential evidence, as when they sample, they have to worry about the **representativeness** of the subset they use. A study of poor people that uses telephone interviews is not likely to result in a representative sample because many, many poor people (including thousands of homeless people) cannot afford phones. Likewise, the researcher who selects 50 protest demonstrations to see how these demonstrations have changed over the last 20 years must make sure that each one selected is sufficiently representative of the period from which it was selected.

4. **Data collection design.** Sometimes researchers collect a lot of evidence but then realize that they don't have the right *kinds* of evidence for the questions that concern them most. For example, a researcher interested in the differences between upper-income whites and upper-income blacks may discover too late that a random sample of a large population typically will not yield enough cases in these two categories, especially upper-income blacks, to permit a thorough comparison. Most issues in data collection design concern the *appropriateness* of the data collected for the questions asked. A study of the impact of a new job training program that provides workers with new skills, for example, should follow these workers for several years, not just several weeks or months. The *timing* of data collection (or "observation") is an important issue in almost all studies. More generally, social researchers recognize that the nature of their evidence constrains the questions that they can ask of it (see especially Lieberson 1985).

Systematic collection of evidence is important even in research that is more open-ended and less structured from the start of the investigation (as in most qualitative research; see [Chapter 5](#)). Often in research of this type, issues of sampling and selection bias are addressed in the course of the research, as the investigator's representation takes shape. A researcher who discovers some new aspect of a group in the course of informal observation will develop a data collection strategy that allows assessment of the generality of the phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 1967;

Strauss 1987).

## Social Researchers Analyze Evidence Systematically

The power of the analytic tools social researchers apply to their evidence is sometimes staggering. Powerful computers, for example, are needed to examine the relationship between household income and number of children across the hundreds of thousands of households included in census data banks. Do families with larger incomes have more or fewer children? It's very difficult to answer this question without a computer and sophisticated statistical software. Most social scientific representations result from the application of some systematic technique of data analysis to a large body of evidence. Different procedures for analyzing evidence are used for different kinds of evidence.

Consider the researcher interested in why some women choose not to have children. First, it is clear that to answer this question, it would be necessary to interview a substantial number of women who are childless by choice (excluding women with children and those whose decisions may be conflated with fertility-related issues). Some effort should be made to talk to women from as many different walks of life as possible. Perhaps women from different ethnic or class backgrounds make this choice for different reasons. Alternatively, a researcher could explicitly limit the scope of the study to a particular type of woman (see, for example, Morell 1994). Because it is a personal topic, and rapport between these women and the researcher is important, these interviews would need to be in depth, perhaps stretching 2 to 4 hours each. It might be necessary to interview 30 to 60 women. Assume 50 women are interviewed for 3 hours each. The researcher then would have a total of 150 hours of taped interviews. How can this large body of evidence be shaped into a representation of the social significance and meaning of intentional childlessness for these women?

Social scientists have devised a variety of techniques for systematically analyzing this kind of evidence. Most focus on clarifying the concepts and categories that help make sense of this mass of evidence (see [Chapter 5](#)). The issue here is not the specific techniques, but the fact that most audiences for social research expect the representation of this kind of evidence to be based on systematic analysis of the entire body of evidence. A journalistic representation, by contrast, might simply tell the stories of a handful of the most interesting cases.

More generally, techniques for the systematic analysis of data are a central part of research design. As noted, the term *research design* embraces all aspects of the collection and analysis of data. Just as most researchers develop a systematic plan for the collection of data—to make sure their evidence is relevant to the questions they ask—they also develop a plan for *analyzing* their data. In the study of intentional childlessness, the plan would involve how to make best use of the hundreds of hours of taped interviews. How does one go about identifying commonalities in the things these women said and how they said them? In a very different type of study, say a survey addressing the relationship between social class and attitudes about abortion, the analysis plan would focus on the measurement of the main variables (social class and attitudes about abortion) and different ways of relating them statistically (see [Chapter 7](#)).

## Conclusion

Social researchers, like many others, construct representations of social life. A study showing

that single men are less satisfied with their lives than married men, single women, or married women is a *representation* of one aspect of society—the complex relations among gender, marital status, and personal satisfaction.

Social researchers construct representations of society and then publish them, usually in scientific journals (for example, *American Sociological Review*, *American Political Science Review*, *American Anthropologist*, and *Journal of Social History*); in scholarly books, reports, and monographs; in textbooks and other teaching material; and sometimes in magazines, newspapers, and trade books—when they want to reach nonacademic audiences. While social scientific representations usually appear in print, they are not limited to these media. They may also be oral (for example, public lectures). They may include tape recordings, photographs, videotapes, documentary films, and even dramatic productions. Thus, social research has a lot in common with other ways of representing social life, but it is also a distinctive way of representing. It is a lot like journalism, but most social research differs in important ways from journalism.

Social research is not for everyone. Many would rather not participate in age-old conversations about fundamental social questions. It's often easier to ignore what other researchers and social thinkers have said. Many consider it tedious to collect large quantities of evidence. It all seems repetitious and painstaking. Many don't want to bother learning how to conduct systematic analysis of large bodies of evidence. After all, it's much easier to find a few easy cases that are interesting and focus on them. Who wants to learn statistics or how to code evidence from hundreds of hours of taped interviews?

It's also true that the evidence itself may seem too constraining. Both journalists and social researchers have trouble with pesky evidence—data that don't give the exact message the investigator would like to present. The social “truths” that can be manufactured through novels, plays, and other forms of fiction may be much more appealing. Finally, some people want their cases to “speak for themselves” as much as possible. They may prefer to present exact recordings like videotapes and let their audiences choose their own messages in these representations.

While social research is difficult and limiting, it also offers special rewards for those willing to make the investments. People who like to read and write about social issues are drawn to social research. Often they have strong political commitments (for example, to fairness in the economic and political arenas). They hope to translate their concerns into publications—representations of social life—that influence social policy. Publications can influence policy directly by bringing issues to the attention of public officials, or indirectly by altering the social consciousness of the informed public. Like the three researchers mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, thousands of other social researchers have constructed representations of social life reflecting their concerns. Many have had a direct or indirect impact on social issues.

The beauty of social research is that it tempers and clarifies the concerns and interests of those who practice the craft. Social research has this impact on people who address social issues in several ways: Social researchers must engage the long-standing debates about society and social life when they conduct research. They must base their representations on systematic examination of large quantities of systematically collected evidence. Social researchers as a community pass judgment on the representations of social life produced by other social researchers (Kuhn 1962; Merton 1973). In effect, they inspect and evaluate each other's work.

Thus, of all ways of representing social life, those that emanate from social research have a very strong grounding in ideas and evidence and a great potential for influencing social policy. As a community of scholars, social researchers work together to construct representations of

social life that fulfill the many and varied goals of social research, from documenting broad patterns and testing social theories to giving voice to marginal groups in society.

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*Note:* **Boldface** terms in the text are defined in the glossary/index.

# The Goals of Social Research

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## Introduction

Social life is infinitely complex. Every situation, every story, is unique. Yet people make their way through this world of complexity. Most situations seem familiar enough, and people can usually figure out how to avoid the unfamiliar. Also, there is order in complexity, even if people are not always conscious of the order. Some of this order-in-complexity is easy to describe (as in what sports fans do to mark certain events in a game). (For example, hockey fans will toss hats out onto the ice when a player scores a “hat trick”—three goals in a single game.) Other examples of order-in-complexity are difficult to explain, much less describe (such as the interplay of pagan and Christian symbols in the development of some religious rituals).

Social researchers seek to identify order and regularity in the complexity of social life; they try to make sense of it. This is a fundamental goal. When they tell about society—how people do or refuse to do things together—they describe whatever order they have found. There is even a describable order to what may appear to be social chaos, such as a mass political demonstration that gets out of hand and leads to a violent attack on nearby symbols of authority. Another fundamental goal exists for many social scientists: to generate knowledge with the potential to transform society. These social scientists conduct research with the hopes that their findings will lead directly to social change. They hope their work will have a broader impact on society—by affecting public policy or influencing the direction of social change. Leading sociologists, particularly Michael Burawoy (2005), have pushed in the last 10 years for more **public sociology**—that is, sociological research that is conducted and written specifically to reach people outside of academe, including policymakers, the media, and marginalized social groups. Along with being directed at a broader audience, public sociology defines, promotes, and informs public debate about topics ranging from social inequalities to state-sanctioned torture. Thus, there is an explicit activist element, though not specifically conservative or liberal in political bent. While the merits of public sociology have been debated recently, this tradition extends back to the work of Jane Addams, Harriet Martineau, and other feminist researchers. In addition, the research of W. E. B. Du Bois, centering on racism in the 20th century, is clearly in line with what is now being called public sociology.

While the above two fundamental goals (understanding the complexity of social life and generating knowledge with the potential to transform society) are present within a broad range of research projects, there are many other more specific goals that contribute to these larger ones. They are quite diverse. For example, the goal of testing theories about social life contributes to the larger goal of identifying order in complexity; so does the goal of collecting in-depth information on the diverse social groups that make up society. The goal of giving voice to a

marginalized group contributes to the larger goal of generating transformative knowledge; so does the goal of making predictions about which policy alternatives will result in the desired outcomes. One factor that contributes to the diversity of the goals of social research is the simple fact that social research reflects society, and society itself is diverse, multifaceted, and composed of many antagonistic groups. It follows that the goals of social research are multiple and sometimes contradictory. Today, no single goal dominates social research.

Several of the main goals of social research resemble those of research in the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. These goals include, for example, the identification of general patterns and relationships. When we show that people with more education tend to vote more often and that this link exists in many democratic countries, we have documented a general relationship for individuals living in democracies. Similarly, when we observe that countries with greater income inequality tend to be more politically unstable, we have identified a pattern that holds across entire nation-states. Knowledge of general patterns and relationships is valuable because it is a good starting point for understanding many specific situations and for making predictions about the future. Also, general patterns in society are directly relevant to the testing of social science theory—the body of ideas that social scientists often draw upon in their efforts to make sense of and tell about society.

Some of the other goals of social research, however, are not modeled on the natural sciences. These other goals follow more directly from the fact that social researchers are members of the social worlds they study (see [Chapter 1](#)). For example, some social researchers try to “give voice” to their research subjects—providing their subjects the opportunity to have their stories told, their worlds represented. If not for the interest or concern of social researchers, these groups might have little opportunity to relate their lives, in their own words, to the literate public. For example, the experiences of recent immigrants struggling for survival in the noise and confusion of our largest and most congested cities are rarely represented in the media. The goal of giving voice clearly does not follow from the model of the natural sciences. A physicist is not concerned about giving voice to the lives and subjective experiences of specific particles. The goal of giving voice may come into direct conflict with the goal mentioned above of identifying general patterns because it is difficult to both privilege certain cases by giving them voice and at the same time chart general patterns across many cases. When the goal is to identify general patterns, no specific case, no specific voice, should dominate.

Altogether, seven main goals of social research are examined in this chapter (see “Main Goals” box). Generally, the first three goals follow the lead of the natural sciences. The fourth and sixth goals, by contrast, follow from the social nature of social science—the fact that social researchers study phenomena that are relevant in some special way to the social world of the researcher. The fifth and seventh goals straddle these two domains. In some ways, they link up with natural science models; in other ways, they reflect the socially grounded nature of social research.

### **Main Goals of Social Research**

1. Identifying general patterns and relationships
2. Testing and refining theories
3. Making predictions
4. Interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena

5. Exploring diversity
6. Giving voice
7. Advancing new theories

The list of goals discussed in this chapter is not exhaustive; several others could be added. For example, **evaluation research**, which is a type of social research, seeks to measure the success of specific programs or policies, especially in education and the delivery of social services. Did the clients of an agency benefit when its record-keeping procedures were simplified and streamlined? Or did the resulting sacrifice of detailed information following the effort to streamline harm specific categories of clients? Which ones? While evaluation research usually has very specific goals tied to particular programs, such research is also relevant to general patterns, one of the key concerns of social research. Thus, most social research involves at least one and usually several of the seven goals discussed in this chapter.

Because social research has multiple and competing goals, a variety of different research strategies has evolved to accommodate those goals. A **research strategy** is best understood as the pairing of a primary research objective and a specific research method. The last part of this chapter introduces three common research strategies, among the many different strategies that social researchers use. The three research strategies discussed in this chapter and examined in detail in **Part II** of this book are

1. Qualitative research on the commonalities that exist across a relatively small number of cases
2. Comparative research on the diversity that exists across a moderate number of cases
3. Quantitative research on the correspondence between two or more attributes across a large number of cases

## Seven Main Goals

### 1. Identifying General Patterns and Relationships

Recall that one of the key characteristics of social scientific representations discussed in **Chapter 1** was the focus on social phenomena that are socially significant in some way. Phenomena may be significant because they are common, or general; they affect many people, either directly or indirectly. This quality of generality makes knowledge of such phenomena valuable. For example, suppose it can be shown that in countries where more public funds are spent on the prevention of illness (for example, by improving nutrition, restricting the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, providing children free immunization, and so on), health care costs less in the long run. Knowledge of this general pattern is valuable because it concerns almost everyone.

One of the main goals of social research is to identify general patterns and relationships. In some quarters, this objective is considered the primary goal because social research that is directed toward this end resembles research in the natural sciences. For some people, this resemblance gives social research more legitimacy, making it seem more like social physics and less like social philosophy or political ideology.

For most of its history, social research has tried to follow the lead of the natural sciences in

the development of its basic research strategies and practices. These approaches to research are especially well suited for examining general patterns, and knowledge of general patterns is a highly valued form of knowledge. For example, if we know the general causes of ethnic antagonism (such as the concentration of members of an ethnic minority in lower social classes), we can work to remove these conditions from our society or at least counteract their impact and perhaps purge ourselves of serious ethnic antagonism. As more and more is learned about general patterns, the general stock of social scientific knowledge increases, and it becomes possible for social scientists to *systematize* knowledge and make connections that might otherwise not be made. For example, general knowledge about the causes of ethnic antagonism within societies might help to further understanding of nationalism and the international conflicts spawned by nationalistic sentiments.

Knowledge of general patterns is often preferred to knowledge of specific situations because every situation is unique in some way. Understanding a single situation thoroughly might be pointless if this understanding does not offer *generalizable* knowledge—if it doesn't lead to some insight relevant to other situations. From this perspective, knowing one situation thoroughly might even be considered counterproductive because we could be deceived into thinking an atypical situation offers useful general knowledge when it does not, especially if we are ignorant of *how* this situation is atypical.

Because of the general underdeveloped state of social scientific knowledge, we are not always sure which situations are typical and which are not. Furthermore, because every situation is unique in some way, it also could be argued that *every* situation is atypical and therefore untrustworthy as a guide to general knowledge. In short, when the goal is knowledge of general patterns, social researchers tend to distrust what can be learned from one or a small number of cases.

According to this reasoning, knowledge of general patterns is best achieved through examination of many comparable situations or cases, the more the better. The examination of many cases provides a way to neutralize each case's uniqueness in the attempt to grasp as many as possible. If a broad pattern holds across many cases, then it may reflect the operation of an underlying cause, which can be inferred from the broad pattern. (On issues of plausible inference, see Polya 1968.)

For example, while it may be possible to identify both "kind and benevolent" dictators and democratic governments that terrorize their own citizens, the broad pattern across many countries is that the more democratic governments tend to brutalize their own citizens less. This correspondence between undemocratic rule and brutality, in turn, may reflect the operation of an underlying cause—the effect that the concentration of power has on the incidence of brutality. While not directly observed, this cause might be inferred from the observed correspondence between undemocratic rule and brutality. It is obvious that both brutality and benevolence exist in all countries. Still, across many cases the pattern is clear, and exceptions should not blind us to the existence of patterns.

## 2. Testing and Refining Theories

General patterns matter not only because they affect many people but also because they are especially relevant to social theory. As described in [Chapter 1](#), social theories come out of a huge, ongoing conversation among social scientists and other social thinkers. This conversation is an ever-changing pool of ideas, a resource to draw on and to replenish with fresh thinking.

It is also important to note that there is a virtually limitless potential for new ideas to emerge from within this pool because existing ideas can be combined with each other to produce new ones, and new implications can be drawn from these new combinations. Also, social theory is forever borrowing ideas from other pools of thinking, including philosophy, psychology, biology, and even physics, chemistry, and astronomy. The cross-fertilization of ideas is never ending.

For example, ideas about the relationship between workers and owners in industrial countries, especially the idea that workers are exploited, have been applied to the relations between countries. Some analyses of work emphasize the degree to which profits are based on keeping the wages of workers low, especially those with the fewest skills. From this perspective, there is natural conflict between the owners of firms and the workers: If wages are kept low, then profits will be higher; if wages are too high, profits will suffer.

This thinking has been transferred to the international arena by some theorists who assert that rich countries benefit from the poverty of poor countries (see, for example, Baran 1957; Frank 1967, 1969; Wallerstein 1974, 1979). Some theorists argue that “labor-intensive” production, which uses simpler technologies and tends to offer only very low wages, has been shifted to poor countries, while the rich countries have retained capital-intensive production, which uses advanced technology. Workers in rich countries benefit from the greater availability of high-wage jobs and from the cheap prices of the labor-intensive goods imported from low-wage countries. In this way, all the residents of rich countries—owners, managers, and workers—exploit the cheap labor of poor countries. Furthermore, 10 to 30% of the highly educated workforce in developing countries leave to reside permanently in developed countries—these outflows are commonly referred to as “brain drain” (Lowell 2001).

This argument, which is an example of the cross-fertilization of ideas, can be tested with economic data on countries. In this way, a new perspective—and a new source for testable hypotheses—is derived from existing ideas.

One of the primary goals of social research is to improve and expand the pool of ideas known as social theory by testing their implications, as in the example just presented, and to refine their power to explain. Typically, this testing is done according to the general plan of the scientific method, as described in [Chapter 1](#). Hypotheses are derived from theories and their implications and then tested with data that bear directly on the hypothesis. Often the data are collected specifically for testing a particular hypothesis, but sometimes already existing data can be used (e.g., census and other official statistics published by government agencies).

By testing hypotheses, it is possible to improve the overall quality of the pool of ideas. Ideas that fail to receive support gradually lose their appeal, while those that are supported more consistently gain greater stature in the pool. While a single unsuccessful hypothesis rarely kills a theory, over time, unsupported ideas fade from current thinking. It is important to identify the most fertile and powerful ways of thinking and to assess different ideas, comparing them as explanations of general patterns and features of social life. Testing theories can also serve to refine them. By working through the implications of a theory and then testing this refinement, it is possible to progressively improve and elaborate a set of ideas.

It is possible to conduct social research without paying much direct attention to this pool of ideas. There are many aspects of social life and many different social worlds that attract the attention of social researchers, independent of the relevance of these phenomena to social theory. After all, social researchers, like most social beings, are curious about social life. However, improving the quality of social theory is an important goal because this pool of ideas structures

much thinking and much telling about society, by social scientists and others.

### 3. Making Predictions

While social researchers use theories to derive “predictions” (hypotheses) about what they expect to find in a set of data (for example, a survey), they also use accumulated social scientific knowledge to make predictions about the future and other novel situations. It is this second meaning of the word **prediction** that is intended when we say that “making predictions” is one of the main goals of social research.

Consider an example of this second kind of prediction: Research indicates that ethnic conflict tends to increase when the supply of economic rewards and resources (jobs and promotions, for instance) decreases. Thus, a social scientist would predict increased ethnic tensions in an ethnically diverse country that has just experienced a serious economic downturn. Prediction is often considered the highest goal of science: We accumulate knowledge so that we can anticipate things to come. We make predictions based on what we know. Two kinds of knowledge help us make predictions: knowledge of history (past successes and failures) and knowledge of general patterns.

Knowledge of history helps us to avoid repeating mistakes. Understanding of the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, for example, has motivated our economic and political elites to attempt to moderate the violent swings of market-oriented economic life. The 1929 crash provides clear lessons about the need that arises for a balance between the free play of markets (for example, stock markets) and regulations imposed through hierarchies (for example, the Securities Exchange Commission). The prediction here is that unregulated markets will fluctuate widely and may even self-destruct.

The second kind of knowledge, understanding of general patterns, is useful for making projections about likely future events. For example, we know that certain types of crime (drug dealing, for instance) increase when legitimate economic opportunities decrease. We can use this knowledge, combined with assumptions about other causal factors, to extrapolate future crime rates given different employment conditions. If current trends toward higher production levels with fewer workers continue, it would seem reasonable to anticipate increases in certain types of crimes. Projections of this type are quite common and sometimes can be surprisingly accurate. It is much easier to predict a rate (the rate of homelessness, the rate of drug-related crimes, the rate of teenage pregnancy, and so on) than it is to predict what any single individual might do. For example, it is relatively easy to formulate a reasonable estimate of the number of people who will be murdered in Los Angeles next year, but it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to predict very much about which ones, among the millions, will be the perpetrators or the victims.

While making predictions is one of the most important goals of social research, it's not always the case that prediction and understanding go hand-in-hand. Sometimes our predictions are quite accurate, but our understanding of the actual underlying processes that produce outcomes is incomplete or simply erroneous. For example, the causes of drug addiction are quite complex, as is the process of becoming an addict. However, it is a relatively simple matter to forecast levels of drug addiction in major U.S. cities based on knowledge of the social conditions that tend to favor high levels of addiction.

Here is a simpler example: It might be possible to predict with fair precision how many murders will be committed next year based on the number of automobiles stolen this year. However, that doesn't mean that some fixed percentage of the people who steal cars one year

graduate to homicide the next. More than likely, the two rates respond to the same causal conditions (such as unemployment or the formation of street gangs), but at different speeds.

Predicting rates is much easier than predicting specific events. The kinds of things many social scientists would like to be able to predict—namely, the occurrence of specific events at specific points in time in the future—are simply beyond the scope of any science. For example, many social scientists chastised themselves for being unable to predict the fall of communism in the countries of Eastern Europe in 1989. Their failure to predict these dramatic events made them feel inadequate. However, no science, social or otherwise, could possibly achieve this kind of prediction—the timing of specific future social or natural events. The key to understanding this is the simple fact that it is very difficult to predict specific future events.

Consider the natural science of meteorology. At best, this science can predict the probability of rain over the next several days. But what if we want to know when it will start, when it will stop, and how much it will rain? It should be possible to predict these things. After all, no human intervention, interpretation, or subjectivity is involved, only measurable, physical qualities such as temperature, wind direction and velocity, moisture, and so on. But the natural science of meteorology cannot offer this precision; it simply cannot predict specific events. Likewise, meteorology cannot predict which day or even which year a hurricane will again sweep across Louisiana. Even when there is a hurricane in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, it's very difficult to tell which, if any, coastal area it will demolish.

In a similar manner, no social scientists could predict, say in 1980, that communism would fall in Eastern Europe in 1989. For many years, some social scientists claimed that communism was likely to fall in the near future. Even in 1980, a few would have been willing to attach specific probabilities to specific years, say a 40% chance of falling by the year 2000. In addition, social scientists have debated for many decades, and continue to debate, the possibility of Korean reunification and its economic and social consequences. Some argue that the process of reunification has already begun, but at a snail's pace—South Korea recognizes that its economy would not be able to handle a rapid reunification process such as that seen in Germany. Another example is the Communist Party of China that currently dominates the Chinese government. Will it retain its hold on power with the growth of capitalist markets? If not, how and when will a shake-up of this magnitude occur? Social science cannot provide a definitive answer. Social science is not inadequate but appears so because of the specificity of the predictions we desire.

Will a new religious movement, emphasizing conservative values, the sanctity of marriage and the family, self-reliance, and the rejection of white culture and its materialism sweep inner-city neighborhoods next year? Sometime in the next 10 years? Will wild spasms of nihilistic self-destructiveness sweep through teenage populations in the predominantly white suburbs of major U.S. cities in the year 2022? It would certainly be impressive to be able to predict events such as these, but it is outside the scope of any science to offer this degree of specificity. At best, social researchers can make broad projections of possibilities using their knowledge of general patterns.

#### 4. Interpreting Culturally or Historically Significant Phenomena

Knowledge of general patterns is not the only kind of valuable knowledge, however, especially when it comes to understanding social life. In the social sciences, knowledge of specific situations and events, even if they are atypical (and usually *because* they are atypical; see Dumont 1970), is also highly valued. The significance of most historical phenomena derives from their atypicality—the fact that they are dramatically nonroutine—and from their impact on

who we are today.

For example, many social researchers address important historical events such as the Fall of the Roman Empire or the U.S. Civil War. We care about these events and their interpretation because of their relevance for understanding our current situation—how we got to where we are. We are fascinated by the U.S. Civil War not because we expect it to be repeated, but because of its powerful impact on current race relations and the structure of power (who dominates whom and how they do it) in the United States today.

Other phenomena are studied not because of their *historical* relevance to current society but because of their *cultural* relevance. The bits and pieces of African cultures that slaves brought with them, for example, have had a powerful impact on the course and development of American culture. Other phenomena may be culturally significant because of what they may portend. The heavy metal rock culture of the late 20th century, for example, could signal future directions of American culture.

Often there is competition among social researchers to establish the “accepted” interpretation of significant historical or cultural phenomena. For example, social researchers have examined the events that led to the fall of the communist regimes (that is, of the power cliques that controlled the centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe). These events have been addressed because they are historically and culturally relevant and significant, and different researchers have different ideas about how and why these regimes fell. The interpretation of these events that prevails, especially the interpretation of the fall of the communist regime in the former Soviet Union, has important implications for how social scientists, policymakers, and the public think about “communism” and the possibility of centralized control of national economies. It is not always the case that a single interpretation prevails, not even in the very long run. The struggle to have an interpretation accepted as “correct” can extend over generations of scholarship and stretch over centuries of debate.

Social researchers who study general phenomena usually do not address specific events or their interpretation. They would rather know about a general pattern (for example, the covariation across countries between the extent to which democratic procedures are practiced, on the one hand, and the level of political repression, on the other) than about a specific set of events (for example, the detention of U.S. citizens deemed “enemy combatants” by the U.S. government following al-Qaeda’s coordinated attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001). It is difficult, however, to address many of the things that interest social researchers and their audiences with research focusing only on that which is general.

For instance, social researchers sometimes address the subjectivity or consciousness of their subjects. There are many possible interpretations for any set of events: Did the Nazis intend to exterminate the Jews all along, or did they adopt this policy in response to the conditions of World War II? Was it necessary for Stalin to terrorize Soviet citizens in order to forge state socialism? Was he insecure and paranoid, or was terrorism simply an effective way of maintaining his personal power? In both episodes of massive inhumanity, it is not enough to know that millions of people died or how they died. We want to know *why*. However, the study of general patterns typically does not shed light on issues related to the consciousness of their research subjects.

## 5. Exploring Diversity

Another main goal of social research is to explore and comprehend the social diversity that

surrounds us. While this goal may seem similar to the goal of identifying general patterns, and does complement it in some respects, it is quite different. For example, one general pattern is that educational and economic development tend to go together; countries with better schools and higher literacy rates tend to be richer. However, the fact that a general pattern exists doesn't mean that there aren't important and interesting exceptions. Some poor countries have well-developed educational systems and very high literacy rates—for example, Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of over 90% (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2010). Meanwhile, some rich countries have poorly developed schools and surprisingly low levels of literacy—for example, Saudi Arabia with a literacy rate of 85% (UNESCO 2010).

Exploring diversity often means that the researcher ignores dominant patterns and focuses on the variety of circumstances that exist. How is living in a poor country with a high level of literacy different from living in other poor countries? What happens when a low level of educational development or literacy is combined with wealth? In short, the study of diversity avoids an exclusive focus on what is most common.

More generally, exploring diversity furthers an understanding and appreciation of **sociodiversity**, a concept that parallels the ecological notion of biodiversity. We protect biological species close to extinction because we are concerned about biodiversity. The human species dominates all others, so much so that many species are threatened with extinction. Many environmentalists see declining biodiversity as an indicator of the degree to which human societies have threatened the self-regulating natural order of the biosphere we call Earth.

People tend to be less concerned about sociodiversity. Anthropologists have documented dramatic declines in sociodiversity. They have studied societies in all corners of the world over much of the last century. As the reach of global economic and political forces has expanded, these forces have more deeply penetrated many parts of the world. Small-scale societies that were once more or less external to the international system have been incorporated into it. One direct consequence of this incorporation is the disappearance of many cultural forms and practices and the transmutation of countless others. Sociodiversity at the level of whole societies has declined dramatically. More and more, there is a single, dominant global culture.

A simple example of this change is the decline in arranged marriages and the increasing importance of romantic involvement in determining one's spouse in many cultures. For example, the percentage of arranged marriages in Japan fell from 63% to 7% between 1955 and 1998 (Retherford, Ogawa, and Matsukura 2001). From the perspective of the contemporary United States, this shift seems natural and inevitable, and arranged marriages seem quaint. But in fact, arranged marriages have been an important source of social order and stability in many societies, joining different families together in ways that undercut social conflict.

It is important to understand societies that differ from our own because they show alternative ways of addressing common social issues and questions. For example, societies cope with scarcity in different ways. In some societies, great feasts involving entire communities are a routine part of social life. These feasts not only provide protection against starvation, especially during lean years, but they also increase the strength of the social bonds joining members of communities. There has also been remarkable diversity among human societies in how basic arrangements such as the family, kinship, the gender division of labor, and sexuality have been structured or accomplished.

Of course, great social diversity exists today, despite the impact of that giant steamroller, the world capitalist economy, on sociodiversity worldwide. There are many social worlds (and social

worlds within social worlds—see [Chapter 1](#)) in all parts of all countries. There is great diversity even in the most advanced countries—those most closely joined by the world economy. Often, much diversity is simply unacknowledged or ignored. Sometimes assumptions are made about sameness (for example, that people living in inner-city tenements think or act in certain ways) that turn out to be false when the diversity within a social category is examined closely. Also, people often respond to sameness and uniformity by crafting new ways of differentiating themselves from others. Sometimes these efforts lead only to new fads; other times they culminate in entirely new social formations (as when a religious cult withdraws from mainstream society).

At times social researchers start out not knowing if studying a new case or situation will offer useful knowledge of diversity. They study it in order to make this assessment. For example, some immigrant groups are very successful economically. It is important to find out how and why they achieve economic success in order to determine if this knowledge is relevant to other groups (or, more generally, to U.S. immigration policy). It may be that their success is due to circumstances that cannot be duplicated elsewhere, but there is no way to know this without studying the specific causes of their success. Here is another example: Catholic nuns tend to live longer and healthier lives than most other groups, religious or secular. We may not have to live like nuns to match their longevity, but we won't know this unless we study them and find out why they live longer, healthier lives (see Snowdon 2001). Whether or not the study of diverse groups offers knowledge that is useful, research on diverse groups contributes to social scientists' understanding of social life in general.

## 6. Giving Voice

Sometimes the goal of exploring diversity is taken one step further, and the researcher studies a group not simply to learn more about it but also to contribute to its having an expressed voice in society. In research of this type, the objective is twofold: to increase the stock of knowledge about different types, forms, and processes of social life, and to tell the story of a specific group, usually in a way that enhances its visibility in society.

Very often the groups studied in this way are marginal groups, outside the social mainstream (for example, the homeless, the poor, minority groups, immigrant groups, people labeled mentally ill, and so on). This approach to social research asserts that every group in society has a “story to tell.” Some groups (for example, professionals, middle-class white families, and so on) are presented in the mainstream beliefs and values of society as the way life is and should be. Many social researchers believe it is their responsibility to identify excluded groups and tell their stories. By giving them voice, researchers often are able to show that groups considered deviant or different in some way do not deviate as much as most people think. For example, a common finding is that even people in the most dire and difficult circumstances strive for dignity.

While social researchers who do this kind of research often focus on marginal or deviant groups, this emphasis is neither necessary nor universal. Mary Blair-Loy (2003), for example, studied highly privileged women who were devoted to either their high-powered careers or their family life. She documented the balance between the level of commitment to work life expected of executives (work devotion schema) and the level of commitment to home life expected of mothers (family devotion schema). In both schemas, the expected level of commitment is so high that other obligations are to be considered secondary, never equal.

In research of this type, social theories may help the researcher identify groups without voice

and may help explain why these groups lack voice, but theory is not considered a source of hypotheses to be tested. When the goal of a project is to give voice to research subjects, it is important for the researcher to try to see the world through their eyes, to understand their social world as they do. Thus, researchers may have to relinquish or “unlearn” a lot of what they know in order to construct valid representations of their research subjects—representations that embody their subjects’ voice.

To achieve this level of in-depth understanding, researchers must gain access to the everyday world of the group. It might be necessary, for example, to live with the members of a marginalized group for extended periods of time and gradually win their confidence (see, for example, Pattillo 2008). When the researcher feels he or she knows enough to tell their stories, one goal of the telling might be to try to minimize, as much as possible, the voice of the researcher. *Minimizing the voice of the researcher* is viewed as an ethical imperative by some social researchers. The privileging of a researcher’s voice over the research subjects’ voices is seen as another source of marginalization for the individuals or groups being researched (see [Chapter 4](#) for additional discussion).

Some researchers, for example, use photographs of the social group of interest. The researchers may even hand the camera over directly to the subject (a method known as auto-photography or self-directed photography, and pioneered by social psychologist Robert Ziller [1990]). The degree to which the research subjects’ voices are filtered in the process of constructing the final representation varies greatly among researchers. In-depth interviews may be conducted, the subjects may be asked to interpret what they see in the photo images, or may be asked to actually write the captions for the pictures (for photography examples, see Harper 2001; Heath and Cleaver 2004; for a video example, see Holliday 2004). A variety of systematic techniques have been developed by social researchers to facilitate this type of in-depth knowledge and understanding (see Banks 2001; Emmison and Smith 2000; Knowles and Sweetman 2004).

Some social researchers consider research that seeks to give voice as activist or advocacy research and therefore doubt its objectivity. How can research that seeks to enhance the visibility of a marginal group be conducted in a neutral way? Isn’t it inevitable that researchers will favor the positive aspects of marginal groups in their representations of these groups? In reality, most social researchers are committed to objectivity and neutrality in much the same way that most journalists are. However, some common cautions are as follows:

- Don’t whitewash.
- Present the good and the bad.
- Be wary of how people rationalize what they do.
- Maintain skepticism.
- Examine the same events from several points of view.

Giving voice does not necessarily entail advocacy. Still, social researchers who seek to give voice must be vigilant in their efforts to represent their groups appropriately. Most social worlds, marginal or mainstream, are quite complex, and advocacy typically oversimplifies. Generally, it is not difficult to spot a one-sided representation or to recognize research that merely advocates for a group.

Those who argue that giving voice is not a valid research objective should acknowledge that almost *all* research gives voice in the sense that it enhances the visibility of the thing studied and represents the viewpoint of some group or groups, even implicitly. Even a study of the general social conditions that favor stable democracy across many countries enhances the importance

and visibility of stable democracy as a desirable condition simply by studying it. Research that seeks to give voice is clear in its objectives.

## 7. Advancing New Theories

Many different kinds of social research advance social theory, even research that seeks to interpret historical or cultural significance. The testing of theories (goal 2) also advances theory in the limited sense that these tests indicate which theoretical ideas have more support as explanations of social life. The goal of advancing theory as it is used here, however, involves more than assessing and refining existing ideas. When theory is advanced, ideas are elaborated in some new way. To advance theory, it is not necessary to come up with a complete model of society or even some part of it. The development of new ideas and new concepts is the most that research seeking to advance theory usually accomplishes.

Theory testing is primarily deductive. Hypotheses about social life are derived from theories and then tested with relevant data. The researcher then draws the implications of the results of these tests for theory (see [Chapter 1](#)). Research that *advances* theory, by contrast, is usually described as having an inductive quality. On the basis of new evidence, the researcher develops a new theoretical concept or new relationship, or advances understanding of existing ones.

Not only does the researcher use data to illustrate the new concept, but he or she may also elucidate the relation of the new concept to existing concepts. Two researchers, for example, developed the concept of “interactional vandalism” to describe the violations of conversational norms that male street vendors, scavengers, or panhandlers commit when they “cat-call” women walking by their locations (Duneier and Molotch 1999). When developing a new concept, it is necessary to distinguish it from related concepts and to explain its logical and causal connections to others. The concept of the “sticky floor” was developed because of the great deal of attention given to the idea that women employees hit a glass ceiling. Catherine Berheide (1992) did not see women “maxing out” when she looked at low-wage government employees; rather, she saw very little job mobility of any kind.

Many theoretical advances come from detailed, in-depth examination of cases. Exploring diversity, for example, may lead to the discovery of new social arrangements and practices. The study of behavior of the groupies who surround certain kinds of rock bands, for example, might lead to new insights about the importance of rituals in contemporary social life. The mere existence of novel phenomena also may challenge conventional thinking. Existing theories may argue that certain ways of doing things or certain behaviors are incompatible, that it has to be either one or the other. The discovery that “incompatible” elements can coexist calls such theories into question and may force researchers to theorize about how such logically incompatible things can exist simultaneously.

Research that gives voice also may lead to theoretical advances because such research often leaves existing theories behind in its attempt to see social worlds through the eyes of their members. This openness to the viewpoints of low-status and low-visibility people may expose the inadequacies of existing theoretical perspectives. Finally, work that seeks to interpret cultural or historical significance may also advance theory because it, too, is based on detailed analyses of cases. For example, in-depth research on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 could lead to new insights on the importance of the interplay of religious ideology and political organization in the large-scale political changes occurring internationally.

Research that seeks to identify general patterns across many cases is usually associated with

the goal of testing theory (via hypotheses), and less often with the goal of advancing theory, even though, as already noted, testing theory does refine it. However, the analysis of broad patterns can lead to theoretical advances (see, for example, Esping-Andersen 1990; Evans 1995; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Tilly 1984; Walby 2008). Sometimes hypotheses fail or are only partially supported, and researchers generally want to know why. They may study additional patterns in their data to find out why the theory they are testing does not fit the data well.

For example, using a generally accepted theory as a starting point, a researcher might test the hypothesis that richer countries tend to have a more equal distribution of income (that is, within their own borders) than poorer countries. Analysis of relevant data might show that while this pattern holds for most countries, among the richest 15 or so it does not—they might all have roughly the same degree of equality. This finding might lead the researcher to speculate about the newly discovered pattern: Why is it that greater wealth does not lead to greater equality once a certain level of economic development is reached? A variety of factors might be examined in the effort to account for this pattern. This search might lead to the identification of causal factors that suggest fundamental revision of the theory used to generate the initial hypothesis about patterns of income inequality.

While the deduction-versus-induction distinction is a simple and appealing way to differentiate types of social research, most research includes elements of both (see Stinchcombe 1968). For this reason, we argue that all research involves **retroduction**—a term developed by philosophers of science to describe the interplay of induction and deduction (Hanson 1958). It is impossible to do research without some initial ideas, even if the goal is to give voice to research subjects. Thus, almost all research has at least an element of deduction. Similarly, almost all research can be used to advance theory in some way. After all, social theories are vague and imprecise. Every test of a theory refines it, whether or not the test is supportive. Social research involves retroduction because there is typically a dialogue of ideas and evidence. The interaction of ideas and evidence culminates in theoretically based descriptions of social life (that is, social scientific representations) and in evidence-based elaborations of social theory.

## **The Link Between Goals and Strategies**

It is clear that no researcher can tackle all seven goals at once, at least not in the same study. A classic view of science says that it is a violation of the scientific method to try to advance theory (goal 7) and test theory (goal 2) in the same study. Data used to generate a new theory should not also be used to test it. Most of the tensions between goals, however, revolve around practical issues.

It is difficult, for example, to examine many cases so that a general pattern can be identified (goal 1) and also study one case in depth so that its specific character can be understood (goal 6). Even when it is possible to do both, they don't always mix well. What if the findings from the in-depth study of one or a small number of cases contradict the results of the analysis of broad patterns across many cases? Which finding should the social researcher trust? However, both kinds of research are important because both help social researchers find order in complexity, order that they can represent in their reports. The first type of research helps social researchers identify what is general across many cases—to discern the underlying order that exists amid great variation; the other helps them comprehend the complexity of specific situations directly.

Many different strategies of social research have emerged to accommodate its multiple and competing goals. As already noted, a research strategy is best understood as a pairing of a general research objective and a specific research method. Each strategy constitutes a way of linking ideas and evidence to produce a representation of some aspect of social life. Research strategies structure how social researchers collect data and make sense of what they collect. Even though some strategies are clearly more popular than others, there is no single “correct” way of conducting social research.

While there are many different strategies of social research, three very broad approaches are emphasized here:

- The use of qualitative methods to study commonalities
- The use of comparative methods to study diversity
- The use of quantitative methods to study relationships among variables

These three strategies are discussed in detail in [Part II](#) of this book because they represent three common but different ways of carrying on a dialogue between ideas and evidence. The selection of these three strategies does not imply that other strategies are not important or do not exist. Indeed, there are plenty of qualitative researchers who study diversity, and there are many researchers who use comparative methods to study commonalities. The pairings emphasized here (qualitative methods with commonalities, comparative methods with diversity, and quantitative methods with relationships among variables) have been selected because they offer the best illustration of the core features of different methods. They also provide a strong testament to the unity and diversity of social research.

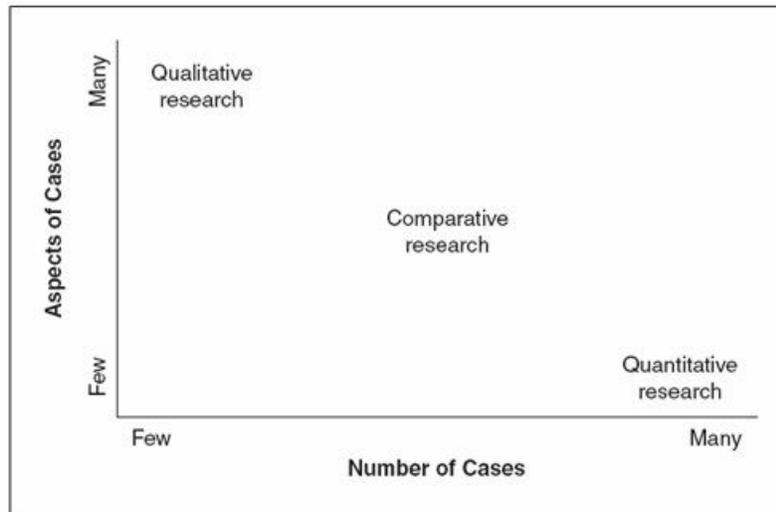
*Qualitative researchers* interested in commonalities examine many aspects or features of a relatively small number of cases in depth. A study of how women without partners decide to become mothers is an example of a qualitative study (Hertz 2006).

*Comparative researchers* interested in diversity study a moderate number of cases in a comprehensive manner, though not in as much detail as in most qualitative research. A study of the effects of decentralization on the redistribution of political power of regional and local governments in Latin America is an example of a comparative study (Falleti 2005).

*Quantitative researchers* interested in how variables covary across cases typically examine a relatively small number of features (that is, variables) across many, many cases. A study of the rate of invalid or missing ballot votes cast by different racial groups is an example of a quantitative study (Herron and Sekhon 2003).

These three strategies can be plotted in two dimensions showing the relation between the number of cases studied and the number of aspects of cases studied (see [Figure 2.1](#)). The figure illustrates the trade-off between studying cases and studying aspects of cases, or variables. Because the energies and capacities of researchers are limited, they often must choose between focusing on cases as wholes (qualitative research on commonalities), focusing on variables (quantitative research on relationships among variables), or balancing the two in some way (comparative research on diversity). It is possible to gain a detailed, in-depth knowledge of a small number of cases, to learn a moderate amount about an intermediate number of cases, or to focus on limited information from a large number of cases.

**Figure 2.1** Cases, Aspects of Cases, and Research Strategies\*




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\*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables.

The trade-off between number of cases and number of features does not concern how much information social researchers can collect. After all, social researchers can collect volumes of information on each of thousands and thousands of cases. The Bureau of Labor Statistics collects detailed information on millions of companies and individuals every year. Rather, the trade-off does concern how much information social researchers—or anyone else, for that matter—can study, how the information is studied (for example, is each case examined individually?), and the relevance of the information to a particular research question.

Imagine trying to grasp the nature of informal, interpersonal networks in each of the top 500 U.S. corporations. It might take years to unravel the informal networks of a single corporation. A social researcher can gain this kind of intimate knowledge about only a relatively small number of cases.

However, it might be possible to survey these same 500 corporations and find out basic information such as total assets, profitability, number of employees, and even the degree to which the board members of these corporations have intertwined social and professional networks. The information from this survey would not add up to intimate knowledge of each of the 500 corporations, but it could be used to examine relations among variables characterizing them. For example, does large corporate size pose an obstacle to profitability? Does the social network of board members shape CEO compensation? Answering these questions does not require in-depth knowledge of the workings of any of the 500 corporations. Of course, such in-depth knowledge would improve the analysis of the evidence on size and profitability or networks and compensation, as well as the representation of the results, but it is not essential to the study of the general relationship among these sets of variables.

It is important to note that [Figure 2.1](#) represents the *tendencies* of these three strategies and does not establish absolute boundaries around the strategies in any way. Some quantitative researchers, for example, collect hundreds of variables on thousands of cases when they conduct research, and they try to squeeze as much of this information as possible into the representations they construct. Of course, these representations are still “big picture” representations of broad patterns of covariation across cases. Likewise, there are some qualitative researchers who work

in teams to increase the number of cases they study. Thus, [Figure 2.1](#) should be viewed as an attempt to depict the nature of the typical representations that result from these three common strategies.

[Table 2.1](#) maps the relation between these three strategies and the seven goals of social research discussed in this chapter. The column headings of the table are the three general strategies; the rows are the seven goals. The table shows the fit between goals and strategies, focusing on the three strategies emphasized here.

**Table 2.1** The Goals and Strategies of Social Research\*

	Qualitative Research	Comparative Research	Quantitative Research
1. Identifying broad patterns		secondary	primary
2. Testing/refining theory	secondary	secondary	primary
3. Making predictions		secondary	primary
4. Interpreting significance	primary	primary	
5. Exploring diversity	secondary	primary	secondary
6. Giving voice	primary		
7. Advancing new theories	primary	primary	secondary

\*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables. *Primary* indicates that the strategy is a very common way of achieving a goal; *secondary* indicates that the strategy is sometimes used to achieve a goal.

The three different strategies range from intensive (qualitative study of commonalities) to comprehensive (comparative study of diversity) to extensive (quantitative study of the relationships among variables) in their approach to cases. An intensive approach is best suited for goals that involve close attention to specific cases; a comprehensive approach is best suited for goals that involve examination of patterns of similarities and differences across a moderate number of cases; and an extensive approach is best suited for goals that involve knowledge of broad patterns across many cases. It is important to remember, however, that the strategies examined here and in [Part II](#) are three among many different strategies of social research.

The goal of identifying general patterns (Goal 1), for example, is best served by the quantitative approach, but it is also served by the comparative approach, though maybe not quite as well. (Thus, the primary strategy for identifying general patterns is the quantitative approach; a secondary strategy is the comparative approach.) A pattern is not general if it does not embrace many cases. Also, most statements about general patterns involve variables. Both of these features of general patterns point to the quantitative approach as the primary strategy. The goal of testing theory (goal 2) is also served by quantitative and comparative strategies. Most theories, however, are composed of abstract concepts that are linked to each other and thus concern general relationships that can be viewed across many cases or across a range of cases. Sometimes a single case will offer a critical test of a theory, but this use of individual cases is relatively rare (Eckstein 1992). Moreover, from the perspective of most theories, single cases are unique and therefore relatively unreliable as raw material for testing theories. Likewise, the most appropriate

strategy for making predictions is the quantitative approach. Most predictions involve extrapolations based on many cases—the more the better, as long as they are appropriate and relevant to the substance of the prediction.

The goals of interpreting significance and giving voice, by contrast, are best served by strategies that examine a small number of cases (often a single historical episode or a single group) in depth—the qualitative approach. Similarly, the best raw material for advancing theory is often provided by strategies that focus on cases, which is the special forte of qualitative research and one of the strong points of comparative research. However, all research, including quantitative research, can advance theory. Finally, the goal of exploring diversity is best served by the comparative approach. However, because qualitative and quantitative research contributes to knowledge of diverse groups, they, too, serve this goal.

## **The Social Nature of Social Research**

Imagine a chart comparable to [Table 2.1](#) constructed for a natural science such as chemistry or physics. Goals 4 and 6 would not exist—at least, they would not be considered main goals—and Goal 5 would concern only a handful of researchers. The remaining four goals (1, 2, 3, and 7) are all well served by the quantitative approach—a strategy that addresses general relations between measurable aspects of the things social scientists study. Goals 4, 5, and 6 reflect the social nature of social research. It is also these goals that sometimes make social scientists seem “unscientific,” especially to scientists, social or otherwise, strongly committed to the other goals.

Consider again the goal of giving voice. Why should any particular voice be privileged by social research? Why should a social researcher try to enhance a particular group’s visibility in society? Who cares whether people who are not marginal can understand those who are? Consider the goal of interpreting cultural or historical significance. How do we know that the social researcher is not trying to whitewash horrific events, or perhaps make the members of a truly destructive group look like victims of oppression? Finally, consider the goal of exploring diversity. By highlighting diversity, a social researcher may glorify it. Or it may be that too much focus on differences in society is detrimental. Might it be better to emphasize the things that we have in common, what most members of society share?

These aspects of social research make it an easy target of criticism. However, it is important to understand that no social research exists in a vacuum. Research on general patterns, for example, may simply privilege what is normative. All social research gives voice in one way or another to some aspect of society. Similarly, research that tests theories has implications for how we think about human nature, social organization, and the different kinds of social worlds that are possible to construct. In fact, because of its social nature, all social research has implications for the interpretation and understanding of anything that people do or refuse to do together. Social research is inescapably social in its implications. For this reason, social researchers cannot escape bias, regardless of which goals motivate research.

## **The Process of Social Research**

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