CHAPTER 1
THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Our minds are finite, and yet even in these circumstances of finitude we are surrounded by possibilities that are infinite, and the purpose of human life is to grasp as much as we can out of that infinitude.*

Most social scientists take as their world to study those complex, intricate social phenomena that describe the environments in which individuals and social institutions interact. Some of these phenomena, defined by the society's decision makers as "social problems," have historically been of particular interest to the social science researcher. Paradoxically, although social scientists are well qualified to investigate the content and context of these problems, they have had only minimal influence in defining them and developing alternatives for solving them. These responsibilities have been assigned to others, largely through social, economic, and political processes, rather than academic or scientific ones.

Ultimately, most policy decisions are made outside the scientific community. The primary motivation underlying these processes shaping policy has often been to "maintain the system," to preserve or restore a level of organization and functioning considered satisfactory by those in positions of authority, responsibility, and power. Social problems must often reach threshold levels, beyond which acquiescence is considered less preferable than action, before commissions, task forces, or new government divisions are created, studies begun, and short-term policy recommendations made. Therefore, decisions have frequently been made in response to events per-

* The quotations used at the beginning of each chapter are from Alfred North Whitehead.

ceived as social, economic, or political crises, rather than on the basis of ongoing systematic investigation of underlying causes and effects, the anticipation and prevention of problems, or the identification of possibilities for positive change.

A good example is President Johnson's appointment of a commission to conduct a time-limited study of the causes of the disastrous riots of the summer of 1967 generated by racial unrest. Major policy decisions were to be based on this short-term study. In the aftermath of the Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinations, he appointed a second blue-ribbon commission to study the causes of assassinations. Both groups were composed of a large number of elected officials representing both parties, plus a few black leaders, clergymen, and labor union representatives. Interestingly enough, no social scientists were appointed, in spite of the fact that for at least two decades social scientists specializing in race relations had anticipated such problems and attempted to persuade private foundations and the federal government to undertake large-scale research on minority group relations.[1] The research subject was controversial, and priorities governing the allocation of money did not support forms of research appropriate to the complexity of the problem, such as substantial pilot projects and long-term experimental studies.

Meanwhile, it was clear to social scientists that these commissions could not hope to carry out valid studies of problems this complicated. They could certainly suggest some causes and recommend some solutions, but they would likely have great difficulty applying research principles—knowing what variables to look for, controlling for these variables, and deciding how to measure their effects—while under public pressure to produce a report before the next social crisis or the next election.

Such has been the history of population problems as well, despite the long-term efforts of demographers to alert those in policy-making positions to the problem of worldwide overpopulation and its potential consequences. The same is certainly true for energy problems. The birth control issue, and the attitudes of corporations controlling major sources of energy, have, respectively, limited the investigation of these problems. Yet both issues are extremely complex and warrant large-scale research efforts over time. While competent theory and research have been appreciated in developing policy in these areas, the avoidance of confrontation and the need for immediate, acceptable answers have diminished the value of skillful research as a basis for policy decisions.

This aspect of the policy process has remained largely unchanged. What *has* changed is the role of the federal government. It has progressively become

1. To the credit of the appointed commission members and their staff, however, an extensive effort was made to solicit opinions from reputable social scientists as well as other citizens. The major point is that it is impossible to conduct a scientific study, involving the actual collection and analysis of data, under such pressures.

the major funder of basic and applied research in both the physical and social sciences. This has had several significant effects, particularly on social research.

One effect is that research funding has become more dependent on public attitudes, particularly attitudes toward the economy and its ability to sustain certain kinds of spending. These attitudes are reflected in the Congress, perhaps the most powerful influence with respect to research funding. The Congress has become increasingly subject to special interest pressures, which have had a significant impact on the purpose of research and the extent of its fiscal support. The federal courts play an important indirect role through decisions that mandate research or that result in future legislation affecting research activities. The Executive Branch sets decisive precedents for what issues deserve research attention, and defines the limits within which federal agencies develop research objectives and budgets for Congressional action. Annual governmental budget cycles, and changing policy makers and administrators, further limit long-term research studies.

The expansion of governmental responsibilities has created an additional effect in the form of a growing public demand for greater funding *accountability*—that is, proof of the benefits resulting from tax monies spent. This has required government to produce better evidence of whether tax-supported policy initiatives and social programs are achieving goals considered appropriate by elected officials and special interest groups. To provide the evidence requested, research has become a required component of many statutes and regulations authorizing social programs and projects.

Government support of research, however, has gradually shifted in emphasis from grants for studies seeking information on generic social science issues such as poverty, racism, social movements, large-scale organizations, or deviant behavior, to contracts for shorter-term research projects such as the evaluation of the effectiveness of specific social programs. This trend reflects the increasing strength of utilitarian values and pragmatic preferences compatible with the interests of those constituencies that legitimize government authority.

Consequently, there has been a rapid development of policy-oriented research in response to the increase in government contracts designed to satisfy a particular kind of accountability—i.e., accountability sometimes defined mainly in terms of strictly monetary costs measured against somewhat narrow perceptions of social benefits. Proposals for these contracts are often reviewed by administrators rather than researchers, and a large number of the major government contracts for policy-related social research are awarded to independent research firms rather than to the academic community. Social scientists, with the exception of applied economists, are frequently underrepresented on the staffs of such firms.

The flourishing of policy research has not involved substantially larger numbers of social scientists in policy-making positions, nor has it become a

primary career for very many social researchers. It led initially to an influx of professionals with minimal research training and has often resulted in poor research. At the same time, however, it has provided a new opportunity for well-trained social researchers to study issues of great interest to them, research questions to which they can make an important contribution.

An increased movement of competent scientists into contract research has raised research standards substantially in a number of policy areas. Their research findings have enriched the general knowledge base and improved the formulation of policy alternatives. Also, increasing government responsibility and stronger accountability pressures have created a new public awareness of the value of research, and have given it greater public credibility and prestige. However, with tighter controls being exercised over the conduct of contract research, government regulation of social research has been more pervasive. Such regulation has made it difficult to test a range of theory and apply research designs and methods appropriate to the complexity of the social issues being studied.

The social and political environment of social research, with its intriguing collection of public interests, anxieties, and political priorities, strongly affects the nature of social research in important, continuing ways: the research problems selected, the goals of the research, its assumptions, the subjects to be studied, the inferences to be drawn from findings, and its use. Large-scale research efforts intended to give attention to *prediction* and *prevention* hold less attraction than short-term projects whose purpose is remedial and ameliorative. Research emphasizing the investigation of the complex *causes* of social phenomena is given less support than research describing the effects. The latter often assume immediate importance because of the pressures applied by powerful constituencies.

While understandable organizationally, this sometimes has the unanticipated consequence of denying the society full use of social science expertise in achieving the broader goals of producing, communicating, and utilizing valid knowledge explaining social phenomena. It may deprive the society of the critical inferences and insights that could have been obtained from more rigorous research. If so, this would limit the application of scientific insights in identifying and resolving social problems, and experimenting with new options for improving life quality.

The comparative powerlessness of social scientists to affect the outcomes of social policy has generated a great deal of interesting debate. Some scientists argue that the goals and strategies of science should be kept separate from those of policy. Others insist that social science and social policy are inevitably intertwined. The controversy raises the basic question of what purpose social research should serve. A consensus exists that one of its primary functions is to increase the knowledge base that explains relationships between the major forces in society. There is general agreement that the enrichment of

such a knowledge base, through the continued development and refinement of theory and research, provides the best basis for the formulation of rational, enlightened social policy. But social scientists have not been particularly adept in communicating these ideas to others.

Therefore social scientists must assume some of the responsibility for the predicament in which they find themselves. They may not have made a strong enough effort to clarify, pragmatically, the value of the research process and precisely what it involves. Scientific journals have often overused jargon, while popular writing on social science issues has frequently failed to explain adequately how and why research is done. The public has been left with an unclear or naïve impression of the research process and its implications.

Social researchers have been less than willing and eager to challenge the idea that cold, hard statistics and concrete, empirical data are not as crucial to the development of knowledge as intuitive insights and observations. They have not emphasized sufficiently the necessity of viewing social phenomena as complex problems to which equally complex methods must be applied. In response to the needs and demands of policy analysts, politicians, and agency administrators for immediate answers to specific questions, social scientists have often hesitated to suggest that good answers involve a calculated price that includes the sponsorship of long-range basic research as well as shorter-term applied research. They have not always admitted honestly that for some questions only partial answers can be obtained, or sometimes literally no answers, given our present limited knowledge. They have sometimes refused to work with the public, the government, or the private sector to increase their understanding and acceptance of the answers that *are* produced. In general, social scientists have not always been the most effective advocates for what they believe and do.

Those oriented to action in the policy arena are often subjected to realistic pressures to develop quick practical solutions rather than to carry on research designed to study the basic issues. Better income maintenance programs, increased public housing, more jobs, or more adequate education take precedence over research the public tends to view as a simple documentation of *why* these are needed. In this context, the intricate cause-and-effect aspects of these issues seem less important than the need for immediate solutions. The important relationships between economic and social influences and the level of social welfare provision, the guaranteeing of full employment, or the restructuring of education are often not perceived as high priority. Research, in fact, is sometimes mistakenly identified as an expensive exercise in confirming common sense. As a result, the benefits of a more sophisticated research perspective in developing and evaluating alternative policies and programs is frequently lost. And the significance of basic research, which permits the accumulation of usable knowledge on which future options can more rationally be based, may unfortunately be neglected.

THE COMPLEXITY OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

One of the basic difficulties encountered in social research that needs to be communicated more effectively is the existence of a large number of variables that are highly interrelated. In many cases, their causes and effects are hard to disentangle, and there may be almost as many theories or explanations as there are people to formulate them. Policy development, planning, and social research become exceedingly difficult in this situation, and individual biases and ideological differences may predominate. It is simple to fall back on the disclaimer that objective social science is impossible and that such questions must ultimately be resolved by what are essentially political means. The social scientist's answer to this thesis must be resolute.

There must be agreement that the task is a complicated and sometimes frustrating one, and that we should not expect anywhere near the degree of precision that is found in the physical sciences. But this does not mean that steady improvement cannot be made in our theories, methods of data collection and analysis, and in the quality of the data. We must, however, clearly distinguish between the kinds of questions that can and cannot be answered by scientific means. While questions of what *should* be the state of affairs, what is right and wrong, who deserves what, and so forth, are questions that cannot be answered by scientific procedures, there are many questions that can be resolved by these means. In particular, the scientist can make conditional statements of the form "if such and such a state of affairs is desired, then the following means appear to be most efficient," or "if *A* then *B*." This kind of information is surely valuable for the policy maker, though admittedly at present we can make very few simple assertions with any degree of confidence. More realistically, the aim is to provide propositions of the form "Under conditions *A, B,* and *C,* if *X* were increased, then *Y* and *Z* can be expected to increase."

To illustrate the kind of complexity with which social scientists must deal, consider ethnic prejudice and discrimination. A substantial amount of social research has been devoted in the past to documenting different forms of prejudice and the extent of discrimination, and to measuring different degrees of these two phenomena. For example, research findings indicate that Jews are generally less prejudiced toward racial minorities than are Protestants and Catholics, that residential segregation of blacks varies very little from city to city, that the population of blacks has increased in the central cities, that residential segregation is only weakly related to the percentage of blacks in an area or to their income levels, and that industrial unions are less discriminatory than craft unions. Many of these facts are now well known to the general public, though some are not obvious or easily explained by common sense.

The so-called cycle of poverty, as it affects the minority population, has been well documented and publicized. We know that a disproportionate

number of minorities tend to have low incomes, inadequate education, insufficient jobs, high unemployment rates, high disease rates, and high "alienation" scores, all of which *predispose* individuals to poverty. And these factors appear to be causally interrelated. Most would agree that this general statement about poverty is largely accurate as far as it goes. But whenever one finds a large number of factors that are related in this way, one is tempted to select a few preferred choices as the basic causes. However, this allows a wide degree of discretion and ample opportunities for ideological biases to operate.

Imagine, for example, how a proverbial white conservative or liberal might explain the cycle of poverty, ignoring the more naïve one-factor explanations such as "the innate inferiority of minorities" or "the inherent defects of capitalism." The stereotypical conservative may accept the fact that whites tend to be prejudiced and that minorities have faced discrimination, but may place the burden of responsibility for change on minorities themselves. The conservative may insist that prejudice cannot be eliminated simply by passing laws, that minorities must prove themselves deserving and learn to assimilate through their own efforts. He or she may claim that a great outlay of public funds for the unemployed and poor is inappropriate. In contrast, the stereotypical liberal may view prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior as the fundamental reasons for the economic, educational, and occupational difficulties of minorities. The liberal may insist that we cannot break the cycle of poverty unless minorities are compensated for inequities in education, employment, housing, and income that result from institutional racism.

Elaborations on these two interpretations, and their many variants, essentially assign causal importance to very different factors. The first perspective stresses the minority person's responsibility to improve his or her situation by taking advantage of the opportunities available, independent of the social context. The second assumes that the minority person's behavior is almost entirely conditioned by the social environment—i.e., by the behavior of the white majority. There is, of course, some truth in both assessments. However, neither identifies the causes and effects of poverty through a systematic study of a remarkably complex set of interrelated problems.

The major challenge confronting the social scientist is that of deciding objectively which influences should receive the greatest weight in explaining particular phenomena. The key question is how to use the principles of scientific method, broadly interpreted, to judge the relative importance of diverse social forces—rather than relying on compelling rhetoric, political persuasion, or personal philosophy. If the approach taken lacks objectivity and thoroughness, our ultimate assessments will be determined by our own value biases and self-interests.

Certain problems make it difficult to provide really definitive answers to many important questions that might be asked of the social scientist. Some of these difficulties are shared by all the sciences and stem from limitations in-

herent in the scientific method. Some are purely technical and have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Others can be resolved but the data are currently lacking, either because no one had thought of studying the question, or because researchers were prevented from investigating it.

For those wishing to study society, fully recognizing that solutions to research questions and social problems will rarely be simple or immediate, this brief introduction to research indicates the magnitude of the task. The emphasis in the remaining chapters is on the many complexities encountered in the research process. In discussing these, it is often much easier to focus on the complications than to overcome them, since the latter requires considerably more technical knowledge and resources. However, those who underestimate or ignore these difficulties will pay a price later. Undertaking serious research in the social sciences, or acquiring a knowledge of its dimensions as competent research consumers and users, demands that both the possibilities and the problems be approached openly and honestly.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The purpose of research is to apply the scientific method to the complex task of discovering answers to questions. The scientific method is a set of procedures and guidelines designed to increase the probability that the information gathered in investigating questions will yield relevant, reliable, unbiased, and valid answers. No research ever quite reaches that impressive goal, but the scientific research process is more likely to do so than other means.

The scientific method can be summarized simply as follows:

—the statement of the research problem or issue to be investigated, or the *theoretical explanation* to be tested;
—the translation of the abstract ideas in this theoretical explanation into concrete, explicitly identifiable ideas;
—the development of *measures* of the important variables in the theoretical explanation;
—the development of a research *design* to guide the inquiry into the research problem, so that the information gathered truly tests the validity of the explanation to the fullest extent possible;
—the selection of a set of *methods* that implement this design;
—the collection of the research data;
—the *analysis* of this information in the context of the proposed explanation; and
—the *interpretation* of the information, or integration of the findings of the research with the existing knowledge base.

Though in practice this series of integrated activities is never pursued in perfect chronological order by the researcher, the logic of this sequence is dif-

ficult to question. Design, measurement, data collection techniques, and analytic strategies may be brilliantly conceived and implemented; but if there is no meaningful framework for bringing together the results of the research so that the new information supports, expands, revises, or rejects previous explanations, the research has not advanced us terribly far. On the other hand, the theoretical explanation may be clearly and precisely formulated, and the researcher eminently equipped to implement an appropriate research design, but the definitions of the major variables, and the way they are measured to produce research data, may not adequately reflect the true qualities of the phenomenon being studied. Or the theoretical explanation may again be excellently thought out and data collection techniques well in hand, but the research design does not adequately control for the effect of competing explanations, leaving in doubt the value of the data collected and complicating the analysis. Or finally, perhaps the analysis and interpretation of the data may be extremely sophisticated and thorough, but the data unreliably collected and therefore of little validity.

In this sense, the steps in the research process, based on the logical steps of the scientific method, represent a series of prerequisites, the achievement of which predisposes the research process to a more or less successful conclusion. No precise evaluation can ever be made of the relative importance of "each step to the whole" for any one research project. And even the best research contains deficiencies at one point or another in that process. Nevertheless, in general, the more adequate the resolution of each set of tasks in the logical sequence, the more useful the research in producing new knowledge and suggesting fresh explanations for future study. This point of view expresses the organizing philosophy of this introduction to social research.