

SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY



SECOND EDITION

# CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL RESEARCH

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We were fortunate to have had an incredibly conscientious and thoughtful group of reviewers for this edition:

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The many suggestions and ideas of the reviewers not only informed our decisions for this edition, but will influence subsequent revisions. This edition also benefited from series editor Joya Misra's valuable guidance. We are grateful to Pine Forge Press acquisitions editor Dave Repetto for his ongoing support. Finally, our incredibly capable production team improved the book every step of the way. Special thanks go to Teresa Herlinger, Theresa Kay, and production editor Libby Larson. This group was a pleasure to work with and hopefully we will be lucky enough to work with them again.

## PART I

### Elements of Social Research

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Too often, we take for granted the things that require the most explanation. After all, it is easier to assume we know what something means than it is to explain or define it.

So it is with the term *social research*. We seem to know what social research is because we are exposed to so much of it. There are frequent reports in the media about unemployment, homelessness, marriage and divorce rates, immigration, teenage suicide, school reform, world poverty, democratization, and other varied topics. These reports draw on the work and ideas of social researchers.

But can social research be clearly distinguished from other kinds of information gathering and presenting? If so, how? What are the differences between a report of the insights of a streetwise person and those of a social researcher who spends a lot of time studying social life on the same streets? Like many terms, the scope and meaning of social research can be contested.

Part I of *Constructing Social Research* offers several answers to this basic question—What is social research?—and uses this issue to introduce core features of social science. Some accounts of these core features emphasize the distinctive subject matter of social research, for example, the idea that social researchers study society as a whole and not the psyches of individuals, as psychologists do. Other accounts emphasize its distinctive methods, especially the idea that social researchers use analytic techniques that condense information on many observations. This book offers a more encompassing portrait.

Simply stated, social research is one among many ways of constructing “representations” of social life. A novel, for example, is a representation of social life; so is a documentary film. Many different ways of representing social life qualify as social research; many do not. By defining social research as one of many ways of constructing representations of social life, it becomes clear that social research has a lot in common with many other kinds of work, for example, the work of writers, journalists, and documentary film producers. While the representations constructed by social researchers may be similar to those produced by others, they also have important distinctive features, which should not be overlooked.

Chapter 1 critically evaluates several common answers to the question of how social research differs from other ways of representing social life. These include (1) the proposition that social research has a distinctive subject matter—that it offers a special way of understanding society, (2) the argument that social researchers use a special language to tell about society, and (3) the idea that social research is distinguished from other ways of telling about society by its use of the scientific method. The chapter goes on to compare social research with several other ways of constructing representations of social life. Sometimes it is difficult to tell different kinds of representations apart. For example, when news reporters study issues such as homelessness or poverty in a city, their reports focus on much the same factors that social researchers working on the same topic might study. While the similarities between social research and other ways of representing are striking, several important features distinguish social research. These features reflect the goals of social research and the impact of these goals on the construction of social scientific representations.

Chapter 2 examines the diverse goals of social research, with a special focus on the tensions among different goals. Too often, social research is portrayed simply as a process of testing general ideas or theories and producing broad statements or generalizations. That is, social research is portrayed as a natural science like physics or chemistry, with the main difference of focus on a distinctive and difficult subject matter—social life. However, many social researchers pursue goals that are at odds with those of testing theory or producing generalizations. For example, some researchers offer new interpretations of historical events, others seek to “give voice” to marginal groups in society, and still others try to pinpoint the cultural significance of new trends. The current diversity of goals should be both acknowledged and examined because different research goals often lead to very different strategies of social research.

Chapter 3 addresses general features of the process of social research—how social researchers construct representations of social life. Social

research, like almost all research, is organized and systematic, and social researchers generally follow a plan that helps them make sense of the phenomena they study. For example, social researchers typically collect a lot of evidence when they conduct their studies. However, every person, every situation, every event potentially offers an infinite amount of information. Which bits of information should the researcher pay attention to? How is this to be decided? Imagine being interviewed by a social researcher about everything you did yesterday. The interview could take weeks to complete.

The more explicit a researcher’s initial ideas (or “analytic frame”), the clearer the guidance they offer about what should be studied and what can safely be ignored in the infinity of information that every case and every situation presents. While this guidance is helpful, it also can be limiting and thus restrict the researcher’s view. Sometimes, therefore, initial ideas are intentionally underdeveloped, so that the researcher can be more open to new insights. The interplay of ideas and evidence is common to all strategies of social research; however, the nature of this interplay can differ substantially from one strategy to the next.

Chapter 4 explores some of the ethical dilemmas arising in the course of studying social phenomena and constructing representations of social life. The history of ethical travesties (such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Trials) in the name of scientific discovery has played a significant role in shaping the current practices and systems of oversight for research involving human subjects. Ironically, the ethical standards governing such research frequently fail to provide adequate or useful guidance to social researchers. The strategies of social research are typically quite different from those strategies used for biomedical research and, therefore, pose a unique set of dilemmas. These dilemmas do not have simple answers. The boundary between ethical and unethical decisions is often blurry. For example, is it ethical to write a book or article about a group whose actions and ideas the researcher sees as reprehensible when that exposure has the potential to benefit the group? Is it ethical for a researcher to become emotionally or physically intimate with the people in the community he or she is studying? What about observing crimes without reporting them to the police? Or even more extreme, what about *participating* in the criminal activity? Just as individuals in the course of their daily lives disagree about what is ethical, social scientists, too, disagree about what is the right or wrong course of action. This chapter tackles some of the dilemmas at the center of these disagreements—most likely raising more questions than offering answers.

# 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—or 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.

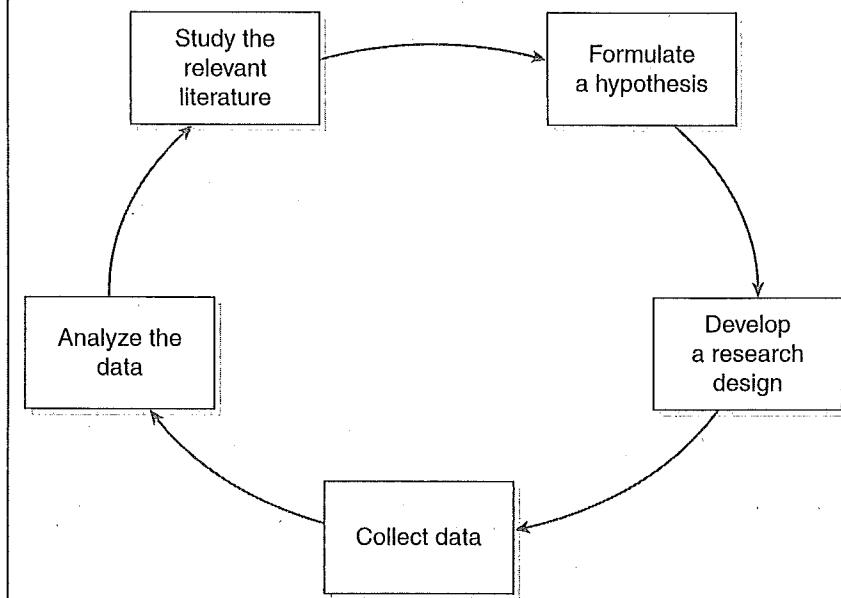
In the **scientific method**, deduction and induction work together. The hypothesis is derived from theory and from existing knowledge about the research subject. Data relevant to the hypothesis are assembled or collected, and the correctness of the hypothesis is assessed. The new knowledge that is generated 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,

**Figure 1.1** The Scientific Method

**The scientific method** is a set of research steps intended to further the acquisition of knowledge such that researchers can avoid making subjective conclusions based on biased evidence. The specific steps are represented in the diagram below.



In practice, researchers use a range of strategies as they seek to understand a social phenomenon. An alternative model of the process of social research, called the *interpretive model*, is presented in Chapter 3.

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.

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.

# 2

## 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 retrodiction 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.

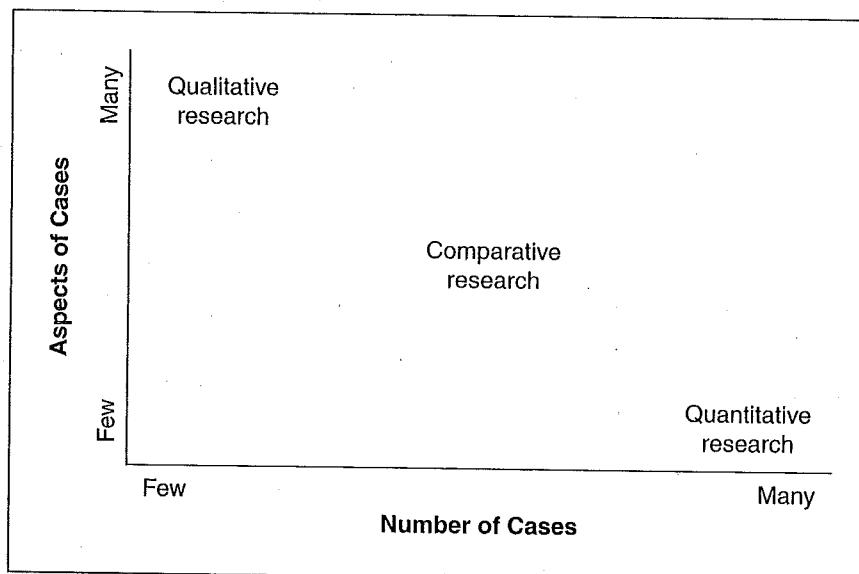
*Qualitative researchers* interested in commonalities examine many aspects or features of a relatively small number of cases in depth. A study of how women without partners decide to become mothers is an example of a qualitative study (Hertz 2006).

*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\*



\*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 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.

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.

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.

# 3

## The Process of Social Research

### Ideas and Evidence

#### Introduction

Social research, in simplest terms, involves a dialogue between ideas and evidence. Ideas help social researchers make sense of evidence, and researchers use evidence to extend, revise, and test ideas. The end result of this dialogue is a representation of social life—evidence that has been shaped and reshaped by ideas, presented along with the thinking that guided the construction of the representation. This chapter focuses on how the dialogue of ideas and evidence is structured and how it is conducted—how ideas shape the understanding of evidence and how evidence affects ideas.

A major part in the dialogue between ideas and evidence is devoted to the analysis of the phenomena the researcher is studying. The term *phenomena* simply refers to facts or events. **Analysis** means breaking phenomena into their constituent parts and viewing them in relation to the whole they form. A researcher conducting an analysis of a revolutionary movement, for example, might try to dissect it in a way that illuminates all the different forces that combined to make the movement (see Jenkins 1994). This analysis would examine not only the social groups that joined the movement (for example, peasants, workers, soldiers, intelligentsia, and so on) but also the social groups that did not, the political and social context, the movement's ideology, and other factors that contributed to its formation.

In essence, the analysis of a revolutionary movement involves breaking it into its key component parts so that it no longer appears to be an amorphous, teeming mass of revolutionaries, but rather can be seen as a combination of key elements and conditions. These elements can be viewed in isolation from one another, and they also can be understood in the context of the other parts. For example, the ideology of the movement could be examined both in isolation (What are the key ideas behind the movement?) and in the context of the major groups involved in the movement (How do these key ideas resonate with the concerns of each group within the movement?). This understanding of the term *analysis*—studying something in terms of its aspects or parts—is necessary background for the concept of *analytic frame*, a key focus of this chapter.

The analysis of social phenomena, while important, is only part of the dialogue of ideas and evidence. The other important part involves the synthesis of evidence. *Synthesis* is the counterpart to analysis. Analysis involves breaking things into parts (in the example above, the constituent elements of a revolutionary movement); synthesis involves putting pieces together to make sense of them. When social researchers synthesize evidence, they form a coherent whole out of separate parts, making connections among elements that, at first glance, may seem unrelated. These connections may lead to further insights into the phenomena they are trying to understand. For example, based on a preliminary examination of evidence from a college sorority, a researcher might develop an initial portrait of it as a type of self-help group. This portrait might be based on interviews with members or observation of the internal support system of the sorority as shown at the start of meetings, where members may be invited to share feelings and personal news, while others actively listen and engage in helping other members as needed. This preliminary synthesis of evidence, in turn, would illuminate other aspects of the sorority, which could then be targeted for further study—for example, how competition between members is contained.

The process of synthesizing evidence is an important part of the dialogue of ideas and evidence. In this chapter, synthesis is presented as a process of forming evidence-based images of the research subject. In social research, representations of social life emerge from the interplay between analytic frames (which are derived from ideas) and images (which are derived from evidence).

It is important to examine the different ways the dialogue of ideas and evidence can take shape, because the character of the representations of social life that result from different ways of practicing social research is strongly

influenced by the nature of this dialogue. For example, the representation of what it is like to be a private in the U.S. Army constructed by a researcher who lives with a group of five privates is likely to differ substantially from the representation constructed by a researcher who uses a questionnaire to survey a random sample of 1,000 privates. In both types of research, there is a dialogue of ideas and evidence, but the two dialogues differ dramatically.

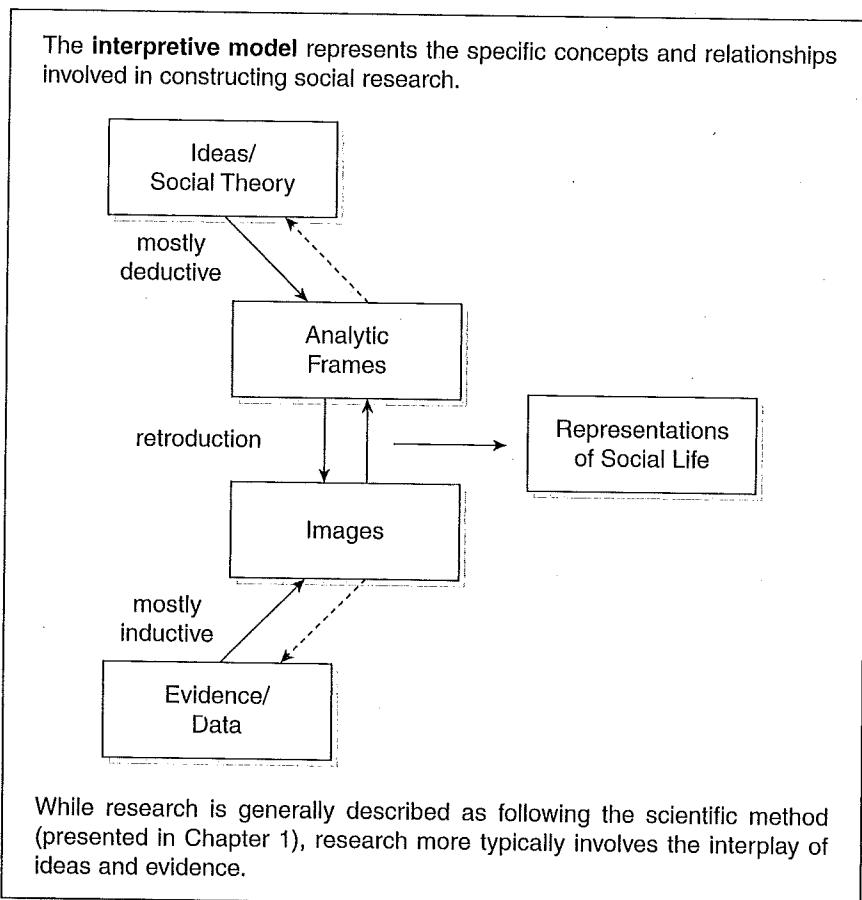
This chapter explains how the dialogue of ideas and evidence in social research is carried on through analytic frames and images. First, the chapter sketches a simple model of the process of social research as a way to introduce its four basic building blocks:

- Ideas
- Analytic frames
- Evidence
- Images

This sketch is presented as a map of the ensuing discussion; it is not a full elaboration of the main points of the chapter. Subsequent sections discuss these four building blocks in detail, especially the two that require the greatest clarification: images and analytic frames. The last section of the chapter addresses differences in the interplay of images and analytic frames across three common strategies of social research: the qualitative study of commonalities, the comparative study of diversity, and the quantitative study of covariation.

## The Interpretive Model of Social Research

Figure 3.1 shows the understanding of the process of social research that guides the discussion in this chapter. At the base of the model is evidence/data. *Evidence* is the everyday word for what social scientists mean when they use the term *data*. Social researchers use a lot of evidence. Studies are often based on the examination of detailed, in-depth information on a small number of cases (as in the qualitative study of commonalities), a moderate amount of information on an intermediate number of cases (as in the comparative study of diversity), or a limited amount of information on many cases (as in the quantitative study of covariation). Ideas are at the top of the model. *Idea* is the everyday word used for what social scientists call “social theory.” Social researchers draw on a pool of ideas when they conduct research, to help them make sense of the things they study.

**Figure 3.1** The Interpretive Model

Ideas and evidence interact through images and analytic frames, as shown in Figure 3.1. Think of an **analytic frame** as a detailed sketch or outline of an idea about some phenomena. Ideas are elaborated through analytic frames. Frames constitute ways of seeing the things they elaborate.

An analytic frame might be used, for example, to articulate the *idea* of a table. People can recognize a table when they see one, even though tables differ greatly, because they have an implicit analytic frame for tables. They understand the category “table,” and they can describe how tables vary—in size, color, material used to construct them, shape of surface, and so on.

The analytic frames of everyday life—like the one for table—are implicit; only rarely are they fully articulated or contested. The analytic frames that guide social research, however, are carefully specified and debated because

social researchers must be precise when they define and characterize the phenomena they study. Much of the work of social research centers on debating, clarifying, and using analytic frames to represent social life. These frames make it possible for social researchers to see social phenomena in ways that enhance their relevance to social theory. The analytic frame for revolutionary movements sketched in the introduction to this chapter, for example, provides a brief specification of some of its key components—the different groups involved, their ideologies, and other elements.

Images, by contrast, are built up from evidence. Based on observations of workers who run their machines so fast that they break, for example, a researcher might develop an image of these workers as troublemakers or insurgents who subvert production while appearing to work hard. To construct images, researchers synthesize evidence—they connect different parts or elements of the things they study in order to create more complete portraits based on some idea of how these parts are or could be related. Initial images suggest new data collection paths. For instance, the researcher working on an image of workers as insurgents who break machines to disrupt work might study the timing of these disruptions. At what points in the workday, the workweek, or even in the life of a labor contract do these production breakdowns occur? Initial images lead to the collection of more evidence and to a progressive refinement of the image. This image of some workers as insurgents, for example, might lead the researcher to look for other manifestations of subtle subversions of production in this work setting. In short, building images is primarily *inductive*.

This process of synthesizing an image from evidence and refining it goes hand-in-hand with the process of analyzing the evidence using analytic frames. In essence, by articulating ideas, analytic frames direct an investigation down specific data collection paths. Suppose, for example, in the research just sketched, the researcher had started with an analytic frame for “resistance” that specified a variety of different conditions for its appearance (perhaps drawing on the ideas of Burawoy 1979 or Hodson 2001). This frame might prompt the researcher to consider the subversion of production as a possible form of resistance. The evidence collected, along with other data, might support the image of some workers as insurgents. Once images are built up from evidence, they may confirm or amend an analytic frame, or they may summon new ones. For example, the image of workers as insurgents might be amended to distinguish between collective actions (such as work slowdown resulting from complete adherence to regulations) and individual actions (such as theft) that are responses to perceived lower pay relative to one’s coworkers rather than a response to the perceived exploitation of self along with one’s coworkers.

Sometimes the researcher seeks simply to find a good fit between the images constructed from the data and the analytic frames derived from theories. Often, though, the fit is not right, and the researcher must determine whether

different images can be constructed from the data or whether different analytic frames can be derived from theories. Alternatively, the researcher may use the images constructed from the data to devise new analytic frames or revise old ones. The interaction between analytic frames and images lead both to progressively refined images of social life and to better-specified analytic frames.

This process of refining images culminates in the representation of social life the researcher offers in a report of the results of the study. A social scientific representation thus can be seen as a product of the interaction between images and analytic frames. It is evidence that has been shaped by ideas, which in turn may have been selected and perhaps revised in response to evidence. The subsequent sections of this chapter elaborate the model in Figure 3.1. Of special importance in this discussion are the less familiar notions of images and analytic frames.

## Ideas

Ideas about society come from everywhere: everyday life, a novel, an unusual event, an analogy, a misunderstanding, a slip of the tongue, a silly joke. Some ideas seem to appear more or less spontaneously. Most ideas turn out to be wrong or to be dead ends. For example, social scientists once thought that temperate climates caused higher forms of civilization to develop. As it turns out, this idea of climactic determinism does not do a very good job of explaining civilization. More than anything else, this thinking showed that those living in temperate climates were ignorant of non-Western cultures and of the complexity of most cultural forms.

Good ideas, or those that at least stand up under scrutiny, become part of the stock of knowledge that is passed from one generation of scholars to the next. In social science, abstract knowledge about social life is called social theory. Most people actually know a lot of social theory without studying it. They know, for example, that bureaucracies can become cumbersome and even choke on their own paperwork and procedures. They don't need to study organizational theory—a branch of social theory—to understand this. They also know that most people most of the time act in ways to maximize their material gains and other self-interests. They don't need a theory of rational choice—another branch of social theory—to understand this. Still, social theory is valuable because this body of thinking explores these and other ideas in depth: What are the types of factors that prevent bureaucracies from choking on their own procedures? Under what general conditions do people make what seem to be obvious irrational choices? Or, even more fundamental, is it always possible to tell which choices are rational and which are not?

The task of making sense of social life is daunting. The accumulated knowledge of social life represented in social theory offers an important

resource. Some social research, as noted in Chapter 1, seeks to improve this body of knowledge by testing ideas derived directly from theory or by identifying general patterns that elaborate theoretical ideas. Not all research, however, is theory centered in this way. Social researchers who seek to interpret culturally or historically significant events, for example, view social theory as a reservoir of possible interpretations. Likewise, researchers who seek to give voice, another key goal of social research (as described in Chapter 2), recognize that their research cannot proceed without some theoretical guidance, yet their primary theoretical objective is to contribute to theory by learning more about phenomena and groups that have been ignored or misrepresented. However, even researchers who are more concerned with contributing new knowledge to this pool of ideas than with using existing ideas participate fully in the dialogue with ideas.

## Analytic Frames

When most researchers approach the pool of ideas known as social theory, they usually have a specific research question or problem in mind. For example, a researcher might be interested in understanding why people vote the way they do. What theoretical ideas (that is, ideas from the pool of social theory) might help in this research? Different ideas lead to different ways of framing and using evidence.

For example, one very simple theoretical idea is the notion that people act in ways that maximize their self-interests—they make rational choices. This theoretical idea sees the question of voting as an individual-level decision based on a sober assessment of the costs and benefits for the person. The researcher would thus see the act of voting as a calculation of individual gains and losses given different outcomes, a calculation that would vary across individuals depending on their characteristics (for example, income or family size). In short, the idea of rational choice would lead the researcher to construct a particular analytic frame for understanding voting, which, in turn, would cause the researcher to see voting in a specific way. For instance, if the researcher notices that income has an effect on voting, a rational choice perspective might lead the researcher to expect that a politician's stance on taxation would motivate voters differently based on their respective incomes. A different idea implemented through a different analytic frame might lead to a dramatically different view of voting, a different way of breaking it into its key components. For example, a theory that emphasized processes of social influence would turn the investigator's focus to the nature of each voter's social networks. So a researcher using this frame might center her analysis on the political beliefs of the voter's parents, spouse or partner, or close friends.

Thus, analytic frames are fundamental to social research because they constitute ways of seeing. While this notion may seem abstract, consider the operation of analytic frames in everyday life: As people go through their lives, they classify and characterize the things around them. For example, they know how to distinguish between “people standing around in a room” and “a party” because they understand and can use the term *party*. They also generally know what makes a party fun—which ingredients in what quantities, and so on—which is another way of saying they know how to characterize parties in different ways. Another way to describe people’s understanding of parties is to say that they have an implicit *analytic frame* for parties. An analytic frame defines a category of phenomena (for example, parties) and provides conceptual tools for differentiating phenomena within the category (what makes them more and less successful; more and less formal; more this, less that; and so on). In short, analytic frames articulate ideas, in this case the *idea* of a party.

The person who is ignorant of the term *party* may not be able to tell the difference between a conference and a party. Both involve rooms full of people who are talking, often at the same time, often without listening to each other, often with laughter, and so on.

Now consider a related example from social research (Smith-Lahrman 1992) that further illustrates the frame as a way of seeing. In some coffee houses, people spend a lot of time *avoiding* interaction. They use posture and props such as newspapers and books to maintain social boundaries and social distance. In this sense, their noninteraction is intentional and therefore is a *social accomplishment*. A quiet coffee house is not a social vacuum; it is teeming with purposeful social behavior.

Armed with the proper analytic frame—one emphasizing nonverbal communication—it is possible for social researchers to *see* that the noninteraction is “accomplished.” Without this frame, it might appear simply that “nothing is happening,” when in fact significant efforts to achieve noninteraction are being exerted throughout the coffee house. In short, without a frame for accomplished noninteraction, researchers might be blind to its occurrences. They might also fail to consider similarities and differences among its occurrences across broad social spaces (for example, differences in how it is accomplished in trains, airports, elevators, and so on; differences in how tweens and teens accomplish it; and other important considerations).

The process of using analytic frames to classify and characterize phenomena is carried out explicitly and formally in social research. Sometimes a social researcher will study something because it is unclear what it is or how it should be characterized. Is the movement toward “political correctness” a fad? Is it a social movement? Is it a new religion? Is a wave of

anorexia among young women a response to fashion? Is it internalized misogyny? Is it an effort to erase gender differences by starving off secondary sex characteristics? Is it an emergent form of mass protest against traditional gender roles—a hunger strike? Which analytic frames work best? A researcher may try several frames to see which makes the most sense of the phenomenon and leads to new insights.

Consider a more detailed example: The decision by same-sex couples to hold a commitment ceremony could be understood as a “political act,” and thus a researcher might study these ceremonies as one might study hunger strikes. Alternatively, a researcher might use the frame of “traditional cultural expression of love.” When people decide to make a long-term commitment, a ceremony announces and publicly solidifies such intent as traditional, conventional, and potentially legally binding. To study commitment ceremonies is to examine the meaning of this act for the individuals involved. The researcher who uses the analytic frame of “political act” constructs a very different representation of the intention behind commitment ceremonies than the one constructed by the researcher who uses the frame of “traditional expression.” In fact, ambiguities about the meaning of same-sex unions culturally, politically, and legally led Kathleen Hull to write the book *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love and Law* (2006). She interviewed 71 individuals in same-sex relationships to expand the body of knowledge concerning marriage rights beyond the context of constitutional, historical, or faith-based arguments by studying the people actually affected by the evolving legal system.

By debating, using, and formalizing analytic frames, researchers are able to relate their work to that of other researchers and to accumulate general knowledge about social life from their separate, individual efforts. For example, the researcher who uses the frame of “political act” to study same-sex marriages contributes to the body of knowledge concerned with the basic mechanisms of social change. The researcher who uses the frame of “traditional expression” contributes to the body of knowledge that addresses cultural rituals. This is not to say that researchers must select fixed analytical frames at the outset of their work; in fact, Kathleen Hull (2006) used a qualitative approach for her project specifically because this would allow her to uncover new perspectives that would not arise if she fixed her analytic frame in one way or the other.

Because analytic frames both classify and characterize social phenomena, they have two main components. When researchers use concepts to *classify* the phenomena they study, they *frame by case*. When they use concepts to *characterize* these cases, they *frame by aspect*. Both components of analytic frames are important parts of the dialogue of idea and evidence in social research.

*Framing by case.* When a social researcher states that most of what occurs in coffee houses is “accomplished noninteraction,” he or she classifies the phenomenon. In essence, the social researcher answers the question, “What is this—the phenomenon being studied—a case of?” The social life of a coffee house provides a case of accomplished noninteraction. Framing by case (that is, answering the question, “What is this phenomenon a case of?”) is an essential part of the process of social research (Ragin and Becker 1992).

When researchers claim that the people and events they are studying are an instance, or “case,” of something wider and more important, a larger category, they offer a frame for their research. For example, to argue that it is important to study the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, as “a case of ineffective international intervention” is to frame this study as an instance of a more general category. Implicit in this statement is the idea that there are many such instances of “ineffective international intervention” and that the study of the genocide in Sudan should make a contribution to that general body of knowledge. Defining the case in conceptual terms—as an instance of something broader—is the most important part of the framing of a study. When more than one case is studied, they are often seen as multiple instances of the same larger category. For example, a comparative study of several instances of ineffective international intervention might examine specific United Nations resolutions that attempted to address the conflicts in Haiti, Rwanda, Sudan, and the former Yugoslavia.

The broad conceptual categories that frame social scientific studies do not always involve large units such as countries or abstract units such as social interaction. The units can be almost any size. For example, a researcher might frame a study of the conflict between the pro-choice and pro-life movements as an instance of “polarized social movements.” Another case of polarized social movements in the United States might be the conflict between organizations representing unions and those representing corporations over “right-to-work” legislation seeking the elimination of compulsory union membership.

Still smaller units are involved when a researcher frames fraternities and sororities as instances of “same-sex communal groups.” And even smaller units are involved when interaction rituals such as greetings are studied as instances of “efforts to cultivate relationships.” All these examples involve framing by case. Even large-scale survey research involves framing by case. When a survey is used to examine the relation between economic interests and voting preferences, for example, the frame treats survey respondents as rational actors.

*Framing by aspect.* Specifying the broader category that is relevant to an investigation is only part of the process of analytic framing. Framing

also involves specifying the key features or aspects that differentiate the cases in a broad category. Framing by case establishes an important category, or set of phenomena; framing by aspect indicates how the cases within a category vary.

For example, social situations that qualify as sites of accomplished noninteraction (a category that includes coffee houses, airports, buses, elevators, waiting rooms, some types of bars, and so on) vary in important ways. How do people accomplish noninteraction in all these different settings? What verbal, nonverbal, and other behavioral cues are used? What features of settings influence which cues are used and how they are used? The list of relevant aspects of settings that should be considered in this frame is very long. Sometimes noninteraction is accomplished among strangers and sometimes among acquaintances. The settings where it is accomplished vary by social density: Sometimes people are spread out and can move about (as in an airport), and sometimes they are tightly packed (as in a plane). Some social spaces are closed (buses, for instance); some are open (parks). Social settings that manifest high levels of accomplished noninteraction vary in many other ways, as well. Each of these features may have an important impact on how noninteraction is accomplished in each setting. Once social researchers answer the question, “What is this a case of?” (that is, once they frame by case), they use theory and other ideas to identify the major features of cases in the frame, and thus frame by aspect.

Consider again the study of the conflict in Darfur, Sudan. To state that this conflict is an instance of “ineffective international intervention” only partially frames this case. It is also necessary to elaborate the important aspects of the instances within this category. There may be many different forms of international intervention with varying degrees of effectiveness, and each method of intervention may involve putting together a different combination of mobilization resistance, trade embargoes, United Nations resolutions, sanctions, non-governmental organization (NGO) interference, and regionally developed policies and strategies. Further, strategies that work well in some contexts may not work at all in others. In short, there are many different aspects to “ineffective international intervention.” The researcher’s analytic frame for the study of ineffective international interventions should embrace all of these aspects.

Framing by aspect helps social researchers see both what is present and what is absent in a given case. For example, assume that the analytic frame for “ineffective international intervention” is applied to the conflict in Sudan. This frame guides the researcher both to examine specific phenomena that were present in Sudan (such as strong NGO interference and global awareness of the conflict) and to consider the impact of features that were

absent in this case (such as a UN consensus on the nature of the conflict) but present in other cases covered by the analytic frame (Rwanda, for instance). Would NGO involvement and worldwide awareness have dampened the conflict if the United Nations had reached a consensus on the nature of it?

In all social research, some sort of guide is needed to see what is present and what is absent in a given case. Sometimes the things that are absent in a case help the most in explaining why it is one way and not another. Note, however, that it is easy to miss what is absent without an analytic frame to guide the analysis. Without this guidance, the tendency is to focus only on what is present.

Together, framing by case and framing by aspect constitute two key conversations that take place in the dialogue of ideas and evidence. How and when these conversations take place differ greatly from one research strategy to the next (Diesing 1971). Sometimes the analytic frame for a research project exists before the research begins and structures most aspects of the research; other times the frame is articulated in the course of the research. The interplay of analytic frames and research strategies is addressed in the final section of this chapter.

## Evidence

When most people think about social scientific evidence, they usually think of questionnaires and telephone surveys. After all, social scientists conduct huge surveys on all aspects of social life and then publish their findings—the percentage of people who think this or that or who do this or that, broken down by gender, race, age, education, income, or whatever. However, social scientists are not limited to survey data. In fact, only a relatively small proportion of social scientists are survey researchers. Many study phenomena that cannot be adequately addressed with questionnaires.

All facets and features of social life offer evidence; virtually everything to a social scientist is “data,” at least potentially. Some social researchers observe social life as it occurs in everyday settings. They take reams of **field notes** on people’s daily routines of family, work, and play in their various locales: street corners and kitchens; offices and factories; country clubs and churches; bars, back alleys, and emergency rooms. Others conduct in-depth interviews with people from different walks of life and try to stimulate their subjects to be more introspective about their lives, to analyze their own thoughts and actions. A researcher interested in labor control, for example, might interview 50 employees of a factory, drawn from all levels and divisions of its workforce. Other researchers study past events, using historical documents and records from libraries and archives. Still other researchers

study patterns across whole cities and countries, using official statistics published in the reports of government and international agencies. There are many, many sources of evidence about social life, and social researchers have explored virtually every type.

Not only are there many different sources of data, but each instance of social life potentially offers an infinite amount of information. The **empirical** world is limitless in its detail and complexity. Social research thus necessarily involves a *selection of evidence*. Most evidence must be ignored as irrelevant; otherwise, research would be impossible.

Consider the seemingly simple task of taking notes on what occurs in a classroom during an hour-long lecture. First of all, it’s necessary to set the stage properly with a physical description of the lecture hall, its atmosphere, the number of people in attendance, their distribution in the lecture hall, and so on. This description could easily fill one notebook. Next, there is the lecture itself. Exhaustive notes on the content of an hour-long lecture could fill another notebook. But then there’s also the lecture as a performance, which includes nonverbal behavior (gestures and other bodily movements) and the interplay of the verbal material and nonverbal behavior. This information could easily fill several notebooks. There should also be notes on the reactions of students in the audience. Of course, with enough resources, it would be possible to monitor the behavior of each person throughout the hour, including his or her verbal and nonverbal behavior, note taking, social interaction, and so on. This would yield enough information to fill at least one notebook for every person in attendance. And don’t forget that it is also possible to take notes on the interaction between the lecturer and the cues—verbal and nonverbal, conscious and unconscious—that the listeners send to the lecturer. A videotape of this interaction could be studied for many years and yield many more reams of field notes. In short, to try to capture the full details of social life—even a very small slice of it—is a colossal undertaking.

Because every slice of social life potentially offers an unlimited amount of evidence, researchers must be selective in their use of evidence. It would take an infinitely long research report to use all the evidence a typical case offers. Although social researchers usually collect large volumes of evidence, the quantity they collect can, at best, constitute only a tiny fraction of the evidence they *potentially* could collect. They try to focus on only the most significant portions, using their ideas, analytic frames, interests, past studies, and so on to help them assess what seems most important to their research questions. The problem of selecting evidence returns us to ideas and analytic frames. Without some sort of sensitizing ideas or concepts, the world seems an amorphous blob. We perceive evidence and select some of it as especially relevant because of our ideas and frames. As will become evident in the next

section, however, the images social scientists construct from these bits of evidence may not conform to the initial ideas and frames that defined the evidence as relevant in the first place.

This need for selectivity introduces a problem: When a writer becomes an advocate for a particular point of view, he or she “selects” for reporting only the bits of evidence that support that position. This kind of selectivity involves an ignorance of evidence, either willful or unconscious, that favors opposing points of view. Ignoring evidence is not always willful, however; sometimes it is a product of limited awareness or limited resources and thus is unintentional. For example, before the rise of feminist perspectives in the social sciences, many researchers did not see the pervasiveness of sexism in everyday life. Thus, evidence bearing on sexism was often missed in studies of a wide range of social relations. Many other forms of ignorance and unrecognized bias infect all research. While it would be great if every social scientist had some way to recognize the impact of such bias on his or her own research, there is no automatic safeguard. Social scientists are only human, and they can’t designate evidence as relevant if their unrecognized biases persuade them to ignore it.

The only real safeguard to unrecognized bias is the fact that social science is *communitarian* (Merton 1973). Social scientists write for other social scientists and they judge each other’s work. They try to detect bias. Often a social scientific representation of social life is evaluated by other social scientists before it is published or made public in some way. This, however, is less true with the dramatic increase in blogging and self-publication. Many well-respected social scientists have discussed ideas and presented data analyses in blogs with peer response rather than peer review. The debates that used to occur around university seminar tables now frequently take place in cyberspace. Peer-reviewed work is usually subjected to close scrutiny both before and after it is published. In fact, social scientific representations are subjected to more scrutiny than most other representations of social life. Of course, if all or even most social scientists share the same unrecognized biases, as is sometimes the case, then the influences of biased selection of evidence will not be immediately recognized. However, social scientists believe that future generations of social scientists will uncover and correct the unrecognized biases of preceding generations.

## Images

Ideas and analytic frames direct the researcher’s attention to specific kinds and categories of evidence. From an ocean of potential data, the researcher selects what seem to be the most relevant portions. Once a sufficient body of

relevant evidence has been collected, the researcher’s next task is to make sense of it and at the same time relate it back to the ideas and frames that motivated the collection of evidence in the first place.

Researchers make sense of their evidence by constructing images of their cases from the data they have collected. In effect, an image is constructed by the investigator when he or she brings together, or synthesizes, evidence. Images often imply motives or say something about causation. When a researcher notes that people with more income tend to vote for the Republican Party, for example, he or she creates part of an image of how a preference for Republicans comes about. Thus, an image is the product of the effort to bring coherence to data by linking bits of evidence in meaningful ways.

Consider an extended example: The researcher who wants to understand how medical students become doctors may start the research with specific ideas about the professions and the nature of professional socialization. One common notion is that each profession upholds certain values or principles and that professional socialization involves learning how to apply these principles in everyday situations. For the medical profession, one central value might be that the health of the patient comes before all else. Because this analytic frame emphasizes the application of abstract principles, the researcher might initiate data collection by observing medical students in clinical practice, with special attention to whatever general principles seem important in these settings. A few weeks of fieldwork in the clinics of a teaching hospital would no doubt result in a huge volume of notes on what was observed. During the process of digesting his or her observations, the researcher may ask questions about the relationship between these abstract principles and professional socialization such as the following: What images of medical students and their professional training emerge from this fieldwork? Which images make the most sense of this new body of evidence? Which aspects of the professional socialization of medical students should be investigated next?

Images are formed from evidence in order to make sense of it, summarize it, and relate it back to the ideas that initially motivated the collection of evidence. To construct images, researchers connect different aspects of cases to form coherent portraits. Suppose the researcher studying medical students found that clinical decision making revolved less around the best interests of patients, and more around the needs of doctors and hospital officials to protect themselves from charges of malpractice. The *image* of professional socialization that emerges from this connection is that training centers on getting medical students to exaggerate the correspondence between this need for protection from malpractice charges, on the one hand, and the best interests of

patients, on the other. After all, charges of malpractice can be avoided in part by exercising extraordinary caution—for example, by ordering many laboratory tests on each patient so that every possible diagnosis is covered. This excessive use of laboratory tests could be construed as “thoroughness” or “expert care” and thus “in the patient’s best interest,” even though testing is often invasive, unpleasant, expensive, and may cause serious reactions and even secondary illnesses.

This image of professional socialization, built up from evidence, both elaborates and challenges the initial frame. The initial frame emphasized the importance of abstract professional values in professional socialization (for the medical profession, “putting the patient first”). The image constructed from evidence, however, indicates that, in everyday settings, professional values are learned primarily in the context of practical and institutional concerns (for example, avoiding charges of malpractice). In other words, practical and institutional concerns *modify* how professional values are understood and implemented. This image of the training of medical students, built up from observations of decision making in clinics, organizes the evidence the researcher has collected in a way that highlights its relevance to the original analytic frame.

Consider another example of images in social research: Researchers have noted that many inner-city neighborhoods have lost their middle-class families to more prosperous, outlying areas, and that these losses have accelerated the decline of these neighborhoods (W. Wilson 1980, 1987). This connection between the loss of middle-class residents and accelerated neighborhood decline contrasts two images. The first is a “thriving minority community”—what it presumably was like before the flight of the middle class: a neighborhood composed of individuals with different income levels (poor, working class, and middle class), with the more successful members offering community leadership, role models, information on how to get ahead, jobs in locally owned businesses, and many other resources for less fortunate members. The second image—the post-flight community—is an “inner-city ghetto” and offers a striking contrast: uniformly poor members with high rates of unemployment, crime, violence, drug addiction, welfare dependence, teenage pregnancy, despair, and so on. Linking these two images is the “exodus” of the minority middle class. This example of the construction of images can be used to illustrate three of their important qualities:

1. Images are *idealizations* of real cases. Every real neighborhood is complex and ever-changing. It is doubtful that any neighborhood perfectly fits either of the two images just elaborated, the “thriving minority community” or the “inner-city ghetto,” at least not for any great length of time.

Images are exaggerations because they are necessarily constructed from selected pieces of information; they cannot reproduce real cases because these are infinitely detailed and complex. Thus, images should be seen as pure or idealized cases (Weber 1949). These two terms—*idealized* (as in idealized cases) and *idealization* (the process)—are used here not to indicate desirability, as in the statement, “This area offers an ideal climate for year-round outdoor sports.” Rather, they are used to indicate that images are *abstractions*. Unlike theoretical ideas, however, they are abstractions that have a specific grounding in a body of evidence. The process of constructing idealized cases (idealization) involves abstracting from information about empirical cases to conceptually elaborated images. As idealized cases, images can be linked to theoretical ideas expressed in analytic frames.

2. Most images imply or embody *explanations*. Most explanations are *causal*, which means simply that they offer accounts of why things are the way they are, emphasizing connections among different phenomena. When we explain the accelerating decline of inner-city neighborhoods by pointing to the exodus of the minority middle class, we pinpoint a causal connection. The key part of a causal explanation is its *cause* words. Cause words, such as *exodus*, are the most important part—the action part—of the images that social scientists construct. Exodus connotes collective, willful abandonment of a specific locale. It’s packed with meaning. Words like *exodus* link images to analytic frames, ideas, and ultimately to social theory. There are social scientific theories, for example, that seek to conceptualize the variety of push-and-pull factors that cause people to move from one community to another. These theories are relevant to many kinds of migrations: the exodus of minority middle-class people from inner-city neighborhoods, the gentrification of other urban neighborhoods, and the back-and-forth migration of Mexicans to and from particular villages in Mexico and specific communities in the United States.

3. Images are *guides* to further research; they suggest new research questions and new avenues to explore. Images help researchers see what they might otherwise miss and thus lead them to examine social life in a more systematic way. For example, we can ask the following questions: Have we omitted any important aspects in either of these two images? For instance, do most “inner-city ghettos” also lack grassroots political organizations? Are there important differences between those with such organizations and those lacking them? Here is another example: Are there inner-city minority neighborhoods with a good cross-section of income groups (poor, working, and middle class) that nevertheless developed high rates of crime, violence, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, and so on? If so, why didn’t the existence

of middle-class role models, leaders, and so forth forestall these developments? For still another example, would the return of middle-class minority members to an inner-city ghetto help roll back the rising tide of violence, drug addiction, welfare dependence, and the like? These questions follow directly from the two images constructed.

Once formed, images interact with analytic frames. The process of constructing images (or *imaging*) complements the process of deriving analytic frames from theory (or *framing* by case and *framing* by aspect). While these two activities, framing and imaging, seem to correspond to deduction and induction, it would be a mistake to limit them in this way. Even though imaging is mostly inductive, it uses evidence that has been defined as relevant by the ideas and frames the researcher brings to the study. It is difficult to form an image from evidence without first using some sort of initial analytic frame to highlight or define relevant evidence.

Likewise, even though framing is mostly deductive, the body of knowledge from which frames are derived summarizes accumulated, evidence-based knowledge about social life. Thus, framing is based on a vast body of systematized evidence. Furthermore, at the start of most research projects, the analytic frame for the research is usually only half-developed, at best. Social theory is abstract, general, and often vague, so much so that several different frames can be derived from the same set of ideas. In the course of the research, if the images formed from evidence are compatible with the initial analytic frame, then they can be used to clarify and refine it. However, sometimes the images formed from evidence reject the initial framing and force the investigator to seek out or develop new frames (Walton 1991, 1992). This interaction between images and frames is best understood as a process of *retroduction* (see Chapter 2).

## Representations

The dialogue of ideas and evidence culminates in representations of social life (see Figure 3.1). In social research, analytic frames and images interact to produce a progressively refined portrait or picture, which becomes the representation (and the explanation) that the researcher offers.

In many ways, social scientific representations can be compared to photographs. The photographer selects an image to be represented, taking care to ensure that the right elements are brought together in the image. By bringing together these elements, the photographer conveys the message or idea he or she intends. The image in the photograph is framed in several ways. Within the photographic image itself, it is framed by focus—some parts of

the image are foregrounded and the focus is sharp, while others are backgrounded and out of focus. The photographic image is framed as well by its boundaries. It can be cropped in a variety of ways; each cropping has a different effect on the meaning of the image. Consider the fact that the world around the photographic image is seamless—it goes on forever. The frame established by the photographer limits the context of the image. Images are unclear if they are not properly framed.

So it is in social research. The main part of the representation is the image, which is built up from evidence. Researchers link pieces of evidence together to make images. The analytic frame provides the context for creating and understanding the image, establishing conceptual boundaries around the evidence-based image. It is important to understand that in both social research and photography, representations appear to audiences as finished products, complete with images and frames. However, these finished products result from a long process. There is interplay of possible frames and potential images in the construction of every representation.

At the core of every social scientific representation is an explicit or implicit explanation of some major aspect of the phenomena it represents. The explanation is what gives the representation coherence, because it is very difficult to “tell about” social life (that is, represent it in some way) without giving some kind of account of it (that is, explain it). For example, the researcher who studies interaction in a coffee house explains how people accomplish noninteraction; the researcher who studies ethnic tensions in a range of countries explains how conflict may be prevented or at least postponed; the researcher who studies medical students explains how they come to see a correspondence between the practical concerns of doctors and hospitals and their professional commitments to patients; and finally, the researcher who studies inner-city neighborhoods explains how their loss of middle-class members contributed to their decline.

Ways of representing the final product of the interaction of frames and images in social research are varied, and the intended audience for a representation has a strong impact on how it is presented. While it is possible to imagine a variety of ways of representing the results of social research (documentary films, dramatic performances, text mixed with still photographs and sound recordings, multimedia presentations, and so on), social researchers tend to use academic books, journal articles, textbooks, and an occasional article in a mass-circulation magazine. In other words, they use traditional academic outlets almost exclusively. Within each of these media, however, different formats may be employed: tables, charts, equations, transcripts, narratives, vignettes describing typical or exemplary cases, and so on.

### Analytic Methods

<b>Deduction</b>	The process of deriving more specific ideas or propositions from general ideas, knowledge, or theories, working out their implications for a specific set of evidence or specific kinds of evidence.
<b>Retroduction</b>	The interplay of induction and deduction, and is central to the process of scientific discovery. The process of constructing representations from the interaction between analytic frames and images involves retrodiction.
<b>Induction</b>	The process of using evidence to formulate or reformulate a general idea. The process of constructing images via the synthesis of evidence is mostly inductive.

## Processes and Strategies of Social Research

While all social research involves interaction between images and analytic frames, the nature of this interaction can differ significantly from one research project to the next. A key consideration in understanding these differences is the role of analytic frames in research. In some research, frames are **fixed** at the start of the study, while in others they may be either **flexible** or **fluid** and change in the course of the investigation.

Analytic frames may be elaborated at the outset of a research project and remain more or less the same throughout the study. This use of fixed analytic frames is often necessary, for example, in studies that seek to test theories. In essence, the analytic frame implements a hypothesis to be tested. If images constructed from the evidence are inconsistent with the hypothesis, then the hypothesis is rejected. Fixed frames are also common in research that seeks to make predictions based on current trends and in studies that seek to document broad patterns.

Fixed frames are most compatible with quantitative research on covariation (see Chapter 7). In research of this type, there is sometimes a close correspondence between the analytic frame developed at the outset of the research and the data set that the researcher then constructs. Recall that analytic frames elaborate ideas by specifying both a category of phenomena and the major ways phenomena within the category vary. For example, a frame that looks at voters as rational actors sees voters as the category and their individual-level differences (such as their different educational backgrounds

or income levels) as aspects that might explain their different choices. This analytic frame readily translates to a survey format, where potential voters are queried about their demographic characteristics and their voting behavior (see Page and Shapiro 1991). This simple translation from the analytic frame to survey data permits a direct test of the idea that inspired the frame in the first place—that voters make rational choices. If the images constructed from the data do not correspond to the idea of rational choice, then the hypothesis is rejected.

In other studies, the analytic frame is flexible; it is elaborated as a guide for research, showing which kinds of factors might be relevant in which contexts. A flexible frame is useful, for example, in studies that seek to explore diversity or advance theory. A flexible frame shows the researcher where to look and what kinds of factors to look for without forming specific hypotheses about relationships among factors.

Flexible frames are common in comparative research (see Chapter 6), especially when the goal is to make sense of a range of diverse cases. Consider a researcher who is interested in tyranny and explores it by studying many of the major tyrants of the 20th century (Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, Rafael Trujillo, Saddam Hussein, and so on; see Chirot 1993). The analytic frame might direct the researcher to examine a range of factors: how these tyrants came to power; what good, if any, they accomplished; who supported them, both domestically and internationally; what ideologies they used, if any, to justify their cruelty; how much suffering they caused; and so on.

Examination of this evidence might lead the researcher to differentiate types of tyrants. For example, the evidence might show that the more ideological tyrants (Hitler and Stalin, among others) caused more suffering than the less ideological ones. In this way, the researcher could elaborate the analytic frame, used initially as a way to guide the research, with these evidence-based images (the two main types of tyrants—more ideological and more abusive versus less ideological and less abusive). Thus, the research could offer important leads for the advancement of theories of political oppression (Chirot 1993).

Finally, in some research, analytic frames are fluid. Researchers who seek to give voice (one of the goals of research discussed in Chapter 2), for example, may want to limit the influence of pre-existing ideas. Of course, they must have some initial ideas about their research subjects; otherwise, the research could not be started. But these ideas might be quickly set aside once the research is underway. Alternatively, the researcher might start with several frames and move fluidly among them, depending on the nature of the evidence as it accumulates. The use of multiple, fluid frames is especially

appropriate when researchers seek to give voice because a fixed analytic frame might prevent them from hearing the voices of the people they study.

Fluid frames are most common in qualitative research (see Chapter 5). Often researchers will not know what their case is “a case of” when they first start their investigation. When there are many possible framings, each can be explored to see which help make the most sense of the evidence. Sometimes multiple frames are retained throughout a project and included in the representation, especially if these different framings illuminate the subject in complementary ways. The American Civil War can be framed in many different ways: as a fight over slavery, as a fight over states’ rights in a federal system of government, as a struggle between a plantation society and an emerging industrial society, and so on. These different frames can be integrated into a single, encompassing portrait.

Framing a case in different ways enriches our understanding of the case when each frame offers insights for other frames. When this occurs, the case or cases that are the focus of the study are said to be “rich” because they provide so much raw material for the advancement of social thought. Unfortunately, this creative interaction among frames is relatively rare in social research. Typically, in qualitative research investigators struggle simply to come to terms with their cases. Existing frames may not work well at all, and the case becomes a platform for developing new ideas and new frames.

## The Challenge of Social Research

Ideas and evidence are everywhere. It’s no great surprise, then, that there are so many people busy constructing representations of social life, from poets and painters to playwrights and political scientists. Different ways of constructing representations require different kinds of regimen. The regimen of poetry, for example, is to construct representations that make the most of as few words as possible. The regimen of social research is also strict, though quite different, and it is reinforced by the primary audience for social research—social scientists.

The regimen of social research demands both clear specification of the ideas that guide research and systematic examination of the evidence used to build images and representations. The challenge of social research is to construct powerful and instructive representations of social life that contribute to social theory (the ongoing conversations about social life), and at the same time embrace a breadth or depth of evidence about social life in a systematic way. This challenge can be met by building a dialogue of ideas and evidence—analytic frames and evidence-based images—into the process of social research.

# The Ethics of Social Research

## Introduction

The ethical norms for a social scientist studying human behavior generally conform to those held by individuals within society. For example, any type of physical or verbal abuse directed by the researcher toward a person or group of people being studied is considered unethical. In addition to general ethical norms, social scientists also are expected to meet particular research standards. Further, just as there is general agreement in society about when some norms have been violated and there is debate about other norms, social scientists also find that there is general agreement about how to meet some research standards and in other cases, ethical standards are less clear. In this chapter, we explore *ethical dilemmas*, instances in which implementation of ethical principles in research is unclear or debatable. Let’s examine two cases.

First, consider an ethical dilemma faced by an individual stationed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003. U.S. Army Specialist Joseph Darby, a reservist, made the decision to turn over a file containing photos of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners to the Army’s Criminal Investigation division (Hersh 2004). He acted ethically in accordance with military standards. The photos were ultimately leaked to the CBS network by an unknown source and aired on *60 Minutes II* (Dao and Lichtblau 2004). Like many other whistle-blowers, Darby experienced a backlash, as many people felt his decision was unpatriotic and contemptible. His actions were interpreted as fueling anti-American sentiment in Iraq and undermining the war effort—so much so that Darby’s family spent 6 months under armed protection because of fears of retaliation, after receiving death threats and having property vandalized

*A democracy, like science, functions best only when all actions are open to question, and when we require the highest levels of accountability. If there is a risk that politics is being placed above empirical truth on issues of vital national importance, inaction by scientists may be unethical.*

—Lawrence M. Krauss  
("The Citizen Scientist's Obligation" 2003)

("Abu Ghraib Whistleblower" 2007). In contrast, Darby was viewed as a hero by many other people. He was awarded the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award in 2005. His actions led to an investigation of the abuses, increased scrutiny of the military's shifting policies on interrogation techniques, and international outrage over the violation of the human rights of detainees. Even though Darby adhered to codified standards, whether his decision was right or wrong can be debated.

Now, consider a research-related example: When qualitative sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) studied the organizational life of gang members, was it unethical that he did not report the crimes (including physical violence) that he observed to the police? What about when he *participated* in the criminal activity? Many argue that it is not unethical to observe illegal, unethical, or otherwise abhorrent behavior as a researcher because the objective of some research is to understand the underground organizational life of subsets of society who are engaged in illicit behavior. A researcher might feel strongly that this basic knowledge could then be used for the benefit of society as a whole (e.g., to reduce the violence committed by gang members). Indeed, it may be considered unethical if a researcher were to *report* any criminal activity to the authorities. For example, Venkatesh might feel it is ethical for him to protect the names of the gang members—similar to a journalist protecting his or her sources. He might also have concerns about potentially unfair treatment by our police and legal system for the gang members and their families.

As the title of his recent book, *Gang Leader for a Day*, implies, Venkatesh (2008) wrote about his participation in illegal drug sales. There is an ethical dilemma here—a trade-off between gaining a full understanding of a drug king's leadership role and participating in illicit activity. However, Venkatesh's choice to step into a leadership role could also be viewed as an *ethical failure* where he had stepped *outside* of his professional role by placing himself in a position of power over those he was studying and where his actions could lead directly to their harm. Let's address this often blurry boundary between ethical dilemmas and ethical failures in greater detail.

## Ethical Dilemmas and Failures

An **ethical dilemma** is when an individual or organization is faced with a situation in which there is a tension between two or more ethical principles. With ethical dilemmas, there exists a debatable set of actions that may or may not be viewed as ethically responsible. An **ethical failure** is when an individual or organization makes a decision that is at odds with professional standards of ethics.

Within the realm of social science research, ethical failures would include the following: deliberately publishing made-up data, plagiarizing the work or ideas of others, taking credit for others' work, giving undue credit to someone who did not contribute to the work, mistreating collaborators and research participants, or concealing known concerns about the research process and results. It seems fairly easy to identify an ethical failure; however, it is not always as easy as it seems. For example, is shoddy research, which is obviously a professional failure, also an ethical failure?

Addressing such failures and dilemmas does not begin to cover the myriad ethical principles, frameworks, and distinctions, but is intended to be a starting point. This chapter elucidates some of the many questions that are involved in doing ethical social research. Before looking more closely at some ethical dilemmas faced by social scientists today, we consider the historical context out of which current ethical principles have arisen, and we describe the ethical principles used by institutions to evaluate proposed and ongoing research projects.

## The Troubled History of Human Subjects Research

Interest in the ethics of human subject research in the 20th century emerged from mistreatment of people in various biomedical studies—mistreatment that has continued well past the notorious examples we discuss below. The inhumane medical experiments performed by Nazi doctors in concentration camps, brought to light in the Nuremberg war crime trials, are some of the most notorious violations of the "do no harm" set of ethical principles followed by medical practitioners. Nazi Germany was not, unfortunately, an aberration in terms of their unethical research practices. In this section, we outline six examples of post-World War II research that generated public outcry and increased skepticism of research-related activities. The first three studies are biomedical; the designs of these three studies clearly introduce a high level of risk for the subjects with limited possibility for benefit to them. The

latter three studies are social science projects, and all three have more room for debate in terms of whether or not they were ethical.

### Tuskegee Syphilis Trials, 1932–1972

The U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) began a study of the long-term effects of untreated syphilis in the early 1930s. Initially, 399 African American men with syphilis from rural Alabama were enrolled *unknowingly* in this study, which became known as the Tuskegee Syphilis Trials. The astounding part is that even after 1947, when penicillin could be used to effectively treat syphilis, treatment was withheld from these men so that researchers could continue their study of the long-term consequences of untreated syphilis. In fact, the researchers took extra efforts to make sure the subjects did not see doctors outside of the study who would, of course, diagnose and treat them (Reverby 2000). The PHS continued to deny treatment to these men until 1972 when an employee leaked the story to the press. By this time, over two-thirds of the men had died from syphilis or syphilis-related complications. (The 1997 film *Miss Evers' Boys*, directed by Joseph Sargent, is based on the Tuskegee experiment.)<sup>1</sup>

### Willowbrook Hepatitis Study, 1963–1966

In 1963, Dr. Saul Krugman, director of research at Willowbrook State School for the Retarded, initiated a research project in order to study the effects of hepatitis in a somewhat controlled setting. Some of the cognitively impaired children were placed in a special unit and deliberately infected with hepatitis (while simultaneously protected from other diseases, such as measles). In addition, when the rest of the school was filled to capacity and no longer accepting new residents, space was available in the hepatitis unit and so admission to the school was in essence contingent on participation in the experiments. The study was halted in 1966 due to public outrage. The rationale for infecting these children with hepatitis was that outbreaks were common within the school, so given that the children were likely to get the disease, it would be better for them to contract it while under medical supervision (Krugman 1986). The legality of intentional transmission of hepatitis has been questioned on the grounds that the risks to these children's health and well-being far outweighed any benefit they could possibly get from being a part of this study (Beecher 1966). A key point of contention with this study was whether parental consent was acceptable when an individual child would receive no realized or potential therapeutic benefit for his or her involvement.<sup>2</sup>

### MKULTRA Project, 1953–1964

The Central Intelligence Agency's Project MKULTRA remains an elusive part of U.S. history, with evidence of CIA misconduct including experimental drug administration and radiation exposure to unwitting subjects from 1953–1964 (Goliszek 2003). The CIA's goals for the project were twofold: first, to develop ways to protect their own operatives and employees from the effects of interrogation techniques, and second, to develop drugs and procedure to increase the efficacy of behavioral modification and interrogation techniques on persons of interest to the CIA. There were 149 projects under the MKULTRA umbrella. The late Senator Ted Kennedy ("Project MKULTRA" 1977) summed up the episode: "The Central Intelligence Agency drugged American citizens without their knowledge or consent. It used university facilities and personnel without their knowledge. It funded leading researchers, often without their knowledge" (p. 4). The majority of the MKULTRA files were destroyed in 1973 as ordered by then-CIA Director Richard Helms.<sup>3</sup>

The unifying theme of these research projects is the exposure of individuals, who are often marginalized or otherwise seen as expendable, to grievous or even fatal risks for a supposedly greater good. The medical research might be seen as more defensible than the politically motivated research, but all three of these studies are viewed as extremely unethical by contemporary standards. By contrast, the social science studies discussed below still have many defenders today, including the original researchers and even some of the subjects. They are overall more difficult to dismiss on ethical grounds, perhaps because there was a much lower risk of physical harm to the subjects. In any case, these three projects are seen as particularly influential in shaping the debate about research ethics. The first two, the Milgram Experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment, overlap considerably with the CIA's agenda of better understanding behavior modification and the nature of compliance and social control. Like some of the CIA's studies, the third study, Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*, also involved individuals who were studied and placed at risk without their consent or knowledge.

### Milgram Experiment, 1961–1962

In 1961, social psychologist Stanley Milgram, then at Yale University, began a series of experiments. The participants, paid volunteers, were told they would be taking part in a learning experiment. They were not told that Milgram's primary interest was in obedience to authority, as this would have

obviously biased the participants' behaviors. The participants were ordered to administer electrical shocks to another person at increasingly intense voltages (up to 450 volts) if the person did not provide the correct answer to a question. That person, an actor working with Milgram, was not actually harmed. During one of his first experiments, 65% of the participants were willing to deliver the final and highest level of shock simply because the authority figure told them to continue. In this condition, the "shock victim" was in a separate room and answered the questions through a signal box. The victim could not be seen and did not vocalize at all; however, the participant could hear pounding on the wall with increasing intensity as the shock levels increased. For subsequent experiments, participants were subjected to slightly different conditions (e.g., having the participant hear the cries of the victim through the wall, having the participant in the same room as the victim, requiring the participant to force the hand of the protesting victim onto a shock plate while administering the shock, and moving the experiment to a location off of Yale's campus to reduce the degree to which the researcher was seen as an authority figure). Many participants experienced extreme duress and emotional breakdowns during and following the experiments and some even begged not to have to deliver the shock, but then complied anyway. Those who refused to continue also experienced psychological strain, perhaps because of their defiance, their unwillingness to complete the experiment, or the pain they believed they had previously administered. Further discussion of the results and details of Milgram's experiments can be found in his 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority*.<sup>4</sup>

### Stanford Prison Experiment, 1971

In 1971, a group of researchers headed by social psychologist Philip Zimbardo set up an experiment to investigate what happens to otherwise well-adjusted individuals when they take on the role of either a prisoner or prison guard. This study became known as the Stanford Prison Experiment. The paid male volunteers, all Stanford University students, were informed that they would be involved in a study of the psychological effects of prison life. The application process included instructions that each participant could leave the study through "established procedures" at any time but by doing so, the person would forfeit his or her pay. They were also told that the prisoners should expect some harassment and violations of their civil rights and privacy while in the makeshift prison. Each of the nine randomly selected "prisoners" was "arrested" unexpectedly at his home by actual Palo Alto police officers, put through booking procedures at the local police station, taken to the "prison" (in the basement of a campus building), and subjected

to additional admissions procedures designed to humiliate him. The guards were instructed to maintain order, create a sense of helplessness among the prisoners, and strip them of their individuality. Within days, the guards began harassing and abusing the prisoners through a variety of tactics, including arbitrarily assigning special privileges to a few, waking prisoners several times a night to make them recite their prison numbers and the prison rules, and punishing them for minor infractions. The punishments included ordering them to do push-ups, subjecting them to strip searches, making the prisoners simulate sexual acts, and putting them in solitary confinement. This type of abuse escalated throughout the study and was particularly brutal at night and other times when the guards felt no one was monitoring them. The experiment was halted on day 6 of the study (8 days early) when an outside researcher who came to interview the guards and prisoners expressed outrage at the sadistic treatment on the part of the guards and concern for the pathological reactions being exhibited by some of the prisoners. Many other individuals who were not directly involved had visited the experiment; none of them had expressed any objection to what they had seen (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973).<sup>5</sup>

### Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*, Mid-1960s

In his book *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, Laud Humphreys (1970/1975) presents the results of his mid-1960s dissertation research on men who met in public restrooms for casual sexual encounters. Humphreys gained access to these men by volunteering to be the "watch queen," a voyeur charged with signaling the men if police arrived. When the men left these encounters, he recorded the license plate numbers of their cars. He then obtained their home addresses through a police department contact. A year later, he went in disguise to their homes to conduct interviews claiming he was doing market research for an insurance company. While his work was influential in terms of expanding the then-limited knowledge of closeted homosexuality (as over half of his subjects lived their public lives as heterosexual men), he was heavily criticized by the academic community for not obtaining consent, using the men's license plate information illegally, risking exposure for the men who were not openly gay, and for conducting the final interviews under false pretenses.

The ethical problems with these three studies are often presented as self-evident; however, each of these researchers felt the research was, at least in part, justified. Humphreys (1970/1975) addressed many of the ethical criticisms of his work in the second edition of his book. He provided further

explanation of how he protected the confidentiality of his subjects and why this information would have been difficult to obtain without some form of deception. He also acknowledged that his research design placed his subjects at greater personal risk than he recognized at the time. Milgram (1974) stated that the key ethical complaint regarding his work had to do with his surprising results, which he could not have foreseen. However, the study was not halted, even after it was clear that individuals were experiencing high levels of psychological distress. Milgram claimed the continuation of the experiments was justified because “there was no indication of injurious effects in the subjects; and as the subjects themselves strongly endorsed the experiment” during the post-experiment debriefing (p. 194). After the results of the first few experiments, it seems reasonable for Milgram to have implemented some process that might have minimized the possibility of longer-term psychological issues (e.g., pre-screening the participants for mental health, having a clinical psychologist onsite to intervene). At a minimum, it appears that Milgram did not fully process the implications of what was happening. Finally, Zimbardo (2007) acknowledged that he was caught up in the dynamics of his makeshift prison and his role as the prison superintendent and was unable to separate himself from the situation.<sup>6</sup>

## The Current Ethical Standards and Institutional Oversight

Due to the widespread attention given to the unethical Nazi experiments, international, national, and professional standards for protecting human subjects were developed. The most influential were the Nuremberg Code (1949) and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 1964). In 1966, the United States’ National Institutes of Health (NIH) established policies for the protection of human subjects based on both Nuremberg and Helsinki. The NIH began requiring that all institutions receiving its funding establish **institutional review boards (IRBs)**. IRBs, typically consisting of faculty members within a university or college, one community representative, and one non-scientist representative, are charged with evaluating and either approving or rejecting research proposals involving human subjects. IRBs are also charged with the oversight of all research involving human subjects conducted by the institution’s faculty, staff members, and students.

In 1974, what was then the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) elevated the NIH policies to cover all federally funded research. Currently, the **Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP)** within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for

overseeing compliance with the federal regulations by individuals and institutions receiving federal funding. Most universities require that all individuals planning research involving human subjects, regardless of the source of funding, secure approval from their IRB.

One of the primary issues with these regulations is that they were developed to address problems with medical and psychological experiments, rather than to provide guidance for the broad range of research done with human subjects, including within social science disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science. We’ll look closely at one of the central documents, the **Belmont Report**, which continues to guide the efforts of IRBs in assessing and determining if a research proposal is acceptable.

### The Belmont Report

In 1978, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (later renamed the Department of Health and Human Services) convened a commission to develop and document ethical principles and practices with the intent to prevent the mistreatment of human subjects. This commission issued the Belmont Report, which delineates three major ethical principles along with their applications:

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Application</i>
Respect for Persons	Informed Consent
Beneficence	Assessment of Risks and Benefits
Justice	Fair Selection of Subjects

This report continues to guide institutional review boards, charged with the oversight of research involving human subjects, in terms of how they determine if a research proposal is acceptable.

In 1978, the Belmont Report was written by a commission charged by the HEW to develop and document ethical principles and practices to prevent mistreatment of human subjects. The report delineates three major ethical principles (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice) along with the applications of these principles (informed consent, assessment of risks and benefits, and fair selection of subjects). This report was never intended to solve all of the problems of social research, but rather to provide “an analytical framework that will guide the resolution of ethical problems arising from research involving human subjects” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research

### Participants or Subjects?

The dominant focus of ethical guidelines on the individuals participating in research experiments has led to the replacement of the label "research subject" with that of "research participant." The ethical concern is that by calling a person a "subject," the researcher may view the individual as an object rather than as an individual; however, the "participant" label only works when the individual being studied is active in the research. For this reason, we have not adopted the new standard consistently throughout this text. It makes no sense to talk about a research "participant" when the individual is unaware of the research (e.g., ethnographic fieldwork); when the individual is not living; or when the research subject is not a person but an organization, group, country, or some other entity. In some of these cases, it may even be misleading to use such a term.

[NCPHS] 1978:1). Contrary to our broad definition of social research, the Belmont Report's principles and guidelines apply to "research," which is defined as an activity "designed to test an hypothesis, permit conclusions to be drawn, and thereby to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (expressed, for example, in theories, principles, and statements of relationship)" (p. 3). In addition, the Belmont Report clearly states that it addresses problems related to biomedical and behavioral research, and that policy relating to other types of social research should also be developed. This additional policy was not developed; instead, these principles have been applied, without modification, to social research.

As you will see below, the Belmont principles do not neatly align with many of the methods used in social research. At best, this means that many social researchers do not get sufficient direction from these principles. At worst, their ability to do social research is thwarted because they attempt to conform to standards that were never intended to apply to their work. More and more universities are responding to this mismatch by establishing separate institutional review boards for the social sciences. After briefly discussing each principle and application below, we will consider several problems within the current system of oversight. Then we turn to dilemmas facing individual researchers as they attempt to do ethically responsible research.

The first Belmont principle, **respect for persons**, recognizes each person's autonomy and his or her ability to deliberate about personal goals

and to act accordingly. Furthermore, it recognizes that not every human being has this ability and that persons of diminished autonomy (e.g., children) must be protected. Respect for persons requires that autonomous human subjects enter research "voluntarily and adequately informed," and that those with diminished autonomy are protected accordingly or perhaps left out of the study entirely. To prove that individuals are entering research studies voluntarily and adequately informed, researchers are often required to obtain **informed consent** from all participants or the participants' legally authorized representatives. To obtain informed consent, researchers must communicate the research procedure, purposes, risks, and benefits to the participants in "jargon-free" language. Also, researchers must clearly communicate that participation is voluntary and that the participant can withdraw at any time. Signed informed consent forms, documenting that participants have been informed of the study details and are voluntary participants, have become a standard requirement of most research proposals.

The **beneficence principle** adds to the respect for persons principle by requiring researchers to ensure the well-being of the human subjects involved. Beneficent actions in research are defined as those that *do no harm* and *maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms*. Researchers are obligated to complete an **assessment of risks and benefits** to justify that the benefits to be gained by the study outweigh the risks to the subjects. The Belmont Report acknowledges a tension here between the benefits to the individual (that is, the subjects of the study) and the benefits to others down the road.

The **justice principle** addresses the issues regarding equal distribution of benefits and burdens of the research. The report specifies that the populations studied must reap the rewards of the research in which they are involved, while recognizing that there are multiple acceptable distribution methods: "(1) to each person an equal share, (2) to each person according to individual need, (3) to each person according to individual effort, (4) to each person according to societal contribution, and (5) to each person according to merit" (NCPHS 1978:9). Furthermore, all benefits of research supported by public funding must be shared with the public, and not just with those who can afford the benefits. The application of this principle, the **fair selection of subjects**, requires that researchers demonstrate that the subjects of their proposed studies are being selected for research reasons and not because of their "easy availability, their compromised positions, or their manipulability" (p. 10).

## Ethically Questionable Research A Thing of the Past?

In spite of the standards and policies developed to better ensure ethically responsible research, contemporary biomedical and social researchers continue to generate controversies. Here are two examples of questionable social scientific research:

- A study conducted by Kennedy Krieger Institute and funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the early 1990s involved renting partially lead-abated housing—housing where lead contamination had been partially reduced—to families with young children and infants so as to monitor the lead levels of the children. Parents signed consent forms, but they were not advised of the hazards of dust in contributing to lead poisoning in children. The "greater good" argument here is that landlords would be more willing to pay for lead abatement in their buildings if they can do a partial (and less expensive) abatement. The U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in 2001 that a parent cannot provide consent for a child to participate in nontherapeutic research.

Otherwise healthy children, in our view, should not be enticed into living in, or remaining in, potentially lead-tainted housing and intentionally subjected to a research program, which contemplates the probability, or even the possibility, of lead poisoning or even the accumulation of lower levels of lead in blood, in order for the extent of the contamination of the children's blood to be used by scientific researchers to assess the success of lead paint or lead dust abatement measures. Moreover, in our view, parents, whether improperly enticed by trinkets, food stamps, money, or other items, have no more right to intentionally and unnecessarily place children in potentially hazardous nontherapeutic research surroundings than do researchers. In such cases, parental consent, no matter how informed, is insufficient. (*Grimes v. Kennedy Krieger Court of Appeals* 2001)

- In 2001, an assistant professor at Columbia University began a study to examine how restaurants handled customer complaints. Apparently without the university's knowledge, Frank Flynn sent identical letters to 240 New York restaurants claiming he had gotten severe food poisoning at that restaurant during an anniversary dinner (Appelbaum 2001). The letter also implied that Flynn would report the restaurant to the Better Business Bureau if it did not respond accordingly. The restaurant owners later stated that the complaint letter had cost them time, money, and peace of mind, as they, along with their staff, tried to track down the source of the food poisoning and determine when and what Flynn had eaten at their restaurant. Some of the restaurants got together and sued (unsuccessfully) the university for \$100 million for libel, emotional distress, and negligent misrepresentation.

## Ethical and Professional Dilemmas Facing Social Researchers

The ambiguity of expectations and requirements often leaves researchers on their own to work through the ethical and professional dilemmas they face when conducting research. The second half of this chapter addresses these dilemmas and problems. First, we discuss the problems faced by researchers as they attempt to reconcile the Belmont principles and applications with social research realities. Second, we examine several professional dilemmas created by IRB oversight. Third, we consider how accountability to different individuals and institutions can create conflict and result in a set of ambiguous choices for researchers. Finally, our last section considers several dilemmas that arise from the interactions between researchers and their subjects.

### Reconciling the Belmont Principles With Social Research Realities

A major dilemma facing social scientists is how and whether to comply with ethical guidelines that often don't address or don't apply to the realities of social research. Here we examine several quandaries that arise from each of the three Belmont applications.

*Respect for Persons and Informed Consent Issues.* Informed consent for certain social research strategies does not make sense. A problem arises for researchers when they are required to obtain signed informed consent forms in situations where they feel the spirit of the principle is better served with some other method (e.g., verbal consent). In fact, the federal guidelines allow for informed consent to be waived when

the research involves no more than *minimal risk* to the subjects; the waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects; the research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009, emphasis added)

However, a waiver may or may not be granted in actuality. The guidelines for informed consent are open to interpretation by the institutional review boards. There are many research projects for which obtaining a signed informed consent form could jeopardize the integrity of the research. For example, it is often inappropriate to request a signed form when participants want to maintain their anonymity, are illiterate, are skeptical of legal

documents, or are fearful of the future implications of their participation (e.g., in situations of state repression or blacklisting). Given that social scientists can have their records subpoenaed, this is of particular concern for researchers studying illicit activities, such as gang life or organized racism. Mandating a signed consent form in such inappropriate situations can undermine the relationship between participants and researchers, affect the interactions going forward, or derail the entire project. Also, astute participants realize that the rationale for a signed consent form may not be just about informing them of the study, but may also be about protecting the universities, external funding agencies, and researchers from litigation. Ironically, completion of the form can become a risk for the research participants.

### Ethnography and Ethics

Mitchell Duneier (2001) describes fieldwork as “a morally ambiguous enterprise” in part due to the intimate relationships that evolve when a researcher immerses himself or herself into the lives of others (p. 336). In his book *Sidewalk*, he took two unusual steps to address this ambiguity. First, he used the real names of the Greenwich Village street vendors he was studying, when standard practice in social research is to use pseudonyms. Second, he is sharing royalties with the 21 people on whose lives the book is primarily based, though this is not a standard or expected practice in his discipline.

A second problem revolves around the quantity and quality of information about the study given to potential participants before data collection. The appropriate balance between fully informing participants about all aspects of a study and protecting the integrity of the research is an issue. The requirement of an individual’s signature on a consent form impacts the degree to which a participant feels like his or her confidentiality will be maintained. Excessively detailed information also might deter certain people from participating, as it may result in an inflated view of the risks involved or the degree to which involvement might result in a subsequent hassle. Consequently, using a consent form that fully informs participants and is signed by them may result in a sample that does not represent a given population. Some research involves deception from the outset, as the findings would be impossible to obtain if the purposes of the research were disclosed up front. This type of deception is common in experimental psychology.

For example, the participants in Milgram’s study could not have been told about his interest in obedience without rendering the results meaningless. Other researchers use deception to “catch” people in behaviors they would otherwise not admit to if they knew they were part of a research study. For example, Monica McDermott (2006) spent a year working as a convenience store clerk in order to better understand race relations among working-class individuals. By working undercover, she was able to observe everyday interactions. The process of getting informed consent, including the detailed procedures and disclaimers, is also likely to affect the subjects’ behaviors and responses. Thus, the way that informed consent shapes the research introduces another variable. Psychologists have demonstrated that research participants often alter their behavior to do what they feel is expected of them rather than what they would do normally (Orne 1962). It seems possible, then, that fully informed consent could produce questionable research results.

A third problem with the respect for persons principle centers on defining who is autonomous and who is vulnerable. If a researcher wants to conduct in-depth interviews with survivors of the World Trade Center attacks, is this acceptable according to the principles laid out by the Belmont Report? Some of these survivors are likely to become upset during the interview. Is the autonomy of these individuals considered “diminished”? At what point will they regain “full autonomy”? Should participation be decided by the individuals asked to participate (assuming they are competent adults) rather than a removed committee, as this research might give the survivors an opportunity to shape the handling of future tragedies? In addition, by ruling out participation of these survivors, the researcher might deny them the opportunity to give voice to their losses as well as their experiences dealing with a highly visible tragedy—a process that could have significant benefits for the survivors. Ironically, researchers studying IRBs run into an interesting circumstance. They need to get IRB approval for certain aspects of their research such as talking to IRB members. The IRB then determines if other IRB members are capable of making their own decision about participation (e.g., Doherty and Kramer 2005; Stark 2007).

*Beneficence and Exposing Injustices.* The underlying ethic of “do no harm” to research subjects embodied in the beneficence principle does not make sense when we consider evaluation, participatory, action, and policy-oriented research whose goals often include calling attention to injustices such as domestic abuse, political corruption, or police brutality. The very act of engaging in the research in the first place occurs in order to bring situations to light, which may trigger a chain of events that would negatively impact the

lives of some of the individuals involved (e.g., the firing of a corrupt leader). When the role of the researcher is to expose injustice, perhaps the ethical principles followed by investigative journalists are more appropriate.

The “do no harm” principle assumes that the human subjects will be somehow medically treated or psychologically manipulated, yet much social scientific research involves observation, archival work, in-depth interviews, and surveying, for which there is little risk of psychological harm and virtually no risk of physical harm. When IRBs disallow research that might cause nonphysical harm to some participants, they enter the murky waters of impinging on academic freedom. When researchers want to better understand religious extremists, survivors of war atrocities, or corrupt politicians, it is likely that there will be stressful moments during the interviews. The potential for psychological distress seems likely, so does this mean these areas of research are off-limits or that they must be studied by some means other than talking directly to the individuals involved? The lack of professional agreement on what constitutes minimal nonphysical harm results in an IRB having tremendous power over what is or is not studied within its institution.

*Justice and Distribution of Benefits.* Evaluation, participatory, action, and policy-oriented research are clearly in sync with the notion that some type of benefit or improved quality of life should be a goal of the research. What, though, is the obligation to give back to the community or individuals in the study? In some cases, researchers hope for direct positive results from their work. For other researchers, however, their work may only have an indirect impact by influencing research down the road. Should researchers simply avoid research projects that do not have the potential for some kind of social or common benefit? And who determines what constitutes a social or common benefit? Researchers also may benefit from successful research by promotions, job opportunities, prestige, and book royalties. Does the principle of justice imply that these benefits be shared? Should researchers whose work results in royalties be required to share these with the people they observed? If so, how much is appropriate? As noted in the earlier text box, Mitchell Dunieier’s (2001) unusual step of sharing royalties with some of the individuals in his book is a prominent and rare example of a researcher attempting to address this principle by sharing the rewards of the research.

### Problems With Institutional Oversight

Beginning in the late 1990s, universities became increasingly risk averse and intensified their scrutiny of all research conducted by their faculty, staff, or students. The reasons for this were not driven by ethicists or social researchers;

rather, this increase in oversight was an institutional response to a wave of biomedical research scandals. The gene therapy trial at the University of Pennsylvania in 1999, which resulted in the death of Jesse Gelsinger, 18 years old, was one of several questionable biomedical studies that drew widespread public attention. The U.S. Office for Protection From Research Risks at the National Institutes of Health withdrew all federal research support, suspended trials midstream, or issued fines at many prestigious universities where ethical lapses and questionable oversight practices had come to light. In addition, many of the cases resulted in litigation. For example, the Gelsinger family sued the university and later settled for an undisclosed amount. The negative public attention, the threat of losing all federal research funding, and the threat of litigation all contributed to the increased scrutiny, extended jurisdiction, and heightened bureaucratic demands of university IRBs.

A recurring criticism is that this intensified regulatory environment has not yielded many, if any, benefits within the social sciences. Nonetheless, social researchers have had to deal with this environment. It is viewed by many as one “in which review of research becomes an exercise in avoiding sanctions and liability rather than in maintaining appropriate ethical standards and protecting human participants” (Burris and Walsh 2007). Many social scientists have written about their increasing frustrations with the current research review process (see “Symposium on Censorship and Institutional Review Boards” 2006). The increased institutional oversight and frustrations with it have certainly shaped how individual researchers are conducting their work. This section covers three issues with the current system of oversight: freedom of inquiry, conflicts of interest, and self-censorship.

*Freedom of Inquiry.* IRB oversight has been used inappropriately to censor research. Some IRB members feel it is part of their job to deny approval to “bad” research designs or topics that they do not consider to be worthwhile. This strikes at the heart of academic freedom. (For numerous real-world examples, see Zachary Schrag’s blog at [www.institutionalreviewblog.com](http://www.institutionalreviewblog.com).) As discussed earlier, IRBs indirectly impinge on academic freedom by attempting to comply with the Belmont principles. Professor of law Philip Hamburger (2004) makes a strong case that IRBs operate as a licensing agency and end up violating the First Amendment rights of researchers. Court rulings so far have not supported the idea that social scientists have a constitutional right to conduct research. Hamburger’s ideas, however, are shaping the debates about IRB oversight and the ways in which it limits academic inquiry.

*Conflicts of Interest.* There are institutional incentives in place that predispose IRBs to overregulate—a “better safe than sorry” mentality dominates

(Carpenter 2007). A major reason for this mentality centers on the competing interests of the IRB. The members of an IRB face pressure to protect the university from scandal litigation. Larger research universities may hire an IRB director who is evaluated on his or her ability to either bring a university into compliance or maintain its compliance. Thus, a university and its IRB have a major incentive to be risk averse to avoid fines, citations, or the withdrawal of funding from the U.S. OHRP. A major scandal can lead to termination of the problematic study and potentially to all studies receiving OHRP funding. In addition, universities and researchers often have a personal financial stake in their project. Within the social sciences, this is typically limited to book royalties, speaking fees, or small ventures (such as the development of surveying technology). Within the world of biomedical research, however, the financial stakes can be huge. For example, a chemist at Northwestern University developed the drug pregabalin to treat fibromyalgia nerve pain (marketed by Pfizer as the blockbuster drug Lyrica). Sales of this drug have bought in tens of millions of dollars to the university as well as enormous wealth to the chemist who developed the product. In another example, both the University of Pennsylvania and the researchers there had financial interests in the gene therapy study that resulted in Jesse Gelsinger's death.

The role of direct corporate funding introduces another potential conflict of interest. Some corporate funders have required that all research from a given study receive their approval before being published. The current system does not fully appreciate how the relationships between industry and universities have become inextricably bound together. Conflicts of interest have the potential to shift the focus of an IRB from protecting the subject or the academic freedom of the researcher to pleasing funding agencies and university administrators. Financial conflicts of interest also may distort a researcher's decision making about what is ethical. These are already major issues within the biomedical world and ones we anticipate will increase in the social sciences.

*Self-Censorship.* The dilemma here is whether to tackle risky, risqué, or politically sensitive research topics, which might become bogged down in the IRB review process. Researchers may also modify their topics to gain IRB approval and move forward in a timely fashion. This self-censoring could have an adverse effect on the quality of research being undertaken. Many researchers admit to this type of reaction. For example, professor of journalism Margaret Blanchard (2002) has shifted her focus from the 20th century to the 19th, as she feels research on deceased subjects will elicit less IRB interference. She has summed up her frustration with her IRB as follows: "A better formula for

demoralizing graduate students and faculty members could not be imagined. A better formula for stultifying research is beyond contemplation" (p. 68).

Researchers are also likely to self-censor when selecting a research strategy. Quantitative research, which tends to be more deductive and adheres more closely to the scientific method, gets IRB approval more easily. This is because the analytical frame for this type of research is largely fixed in advance of the data collection. When the quantitative research is initiated, there is a clear and predictable process. The interactions with subjects are often highly scripted, as in a telephone survey. When other research strategies are used, especially qualitative, the researcher is uncertain of what might unfold. The higher degree of certainty for any given study makes the ethics review process smoother. Only three of the seven goals of social research, identifying broad patterns, testing/refining theory, and making predictions, are suited to the current IRB model because they align with more quantitative research strategies (see Chapter 2).

### Ethics on a Small Scale

A model of social research that centers on ethics will generate changes even in seemingly inconsequential research projects. For example, a researcher was doing a small study of four separate marketing flyers in conjunction with a women's self-defense nonprofit to determine which of four images was most compelling and why. Graduate students participated anonymously and voluntarily, randomly getting one of the four versions along with the same set of survey questions. While the content of the flyers was in no way violent, the researcher felt that two of the questions (Have you or someone close to you ever been sexually assaulted or attacked? Have you ever defended yourself against a sexual assault?) could have brought up thoughts and feelings about negative experiences for some students. To address this, the survey included a separate sheet with information on where students could find support in general and support geared toward those experiencing or recovering from domestic violence or sexual assault (e.g., the counseling center, medical emergency and campus safety information). The entire exercise took no more than 10 minutes during a class break. The researchers easily could have conducted this study without any thought to the students' reactions and most likely no lasting harm would have occurred; however, by adding information about sexual assault resources, the researchers thought beyond their goals for the research and considered the experience of the researched. Consequently, this small study may have yielded some benefit to the participants.

There are several ways in which researchers attempt to resolve this dilemma. One way is to steer clear of institutional oversight entirely. Some do this by determining that their work is outside the boundaries of the federal definition of "research." Research is vaguely defined in the federal regulations code as "systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (HHS 2009). Others believe that their work is exempt because it is not federally funded, when in reality, most universities require IRB oversight for all research involving human subjects regardless of the source of funding. Still others do not see IRB oversight as legitimate and therefore have an easy time deciding that they are not under an IRB's jurisdiction. For example, if his sociological projects are challenged by an IRB, Howard Becker claims he'll say that they are conceptual art, because universities "don't hassle artists" (quoted in Shea 2000).

A second way to address the dilemma involves the focus researchers place on various aspects of their study design when filing the required document for IRB approval. The researcher may provide explanations of the aspects of his or her intended study that best fit with expectations while neglecting to mention or skimming over aspects that are not. For example, qualitative researchers might emphasize their informed consent procedures, the questions that they might ask during in-depth interviews, how they will ensure that their field notes are secure and the confidentiality of their subjects protected, while glossing over other aspects such as potential interactions with children, the possibility of witnessing illegal behaviors, or the degree to which some of their questions might cause a participant stress. This "low-level cheating" is not a well-concealed practice (Swidler, quoted in Shea 2000). In fact, a great deal of negotiating with IRB members occurs prior to the submission of an application.

This brings us to a third way of handling this dilemma, which rests on actions by IRB members themselves. IRB members generally want their peers to be productive, and so they work with the researchers to wordsmith their applications and informed consent forms to satisfy the IRB's interpretation of the regulations. Also, an IRB member might fully understand the inductive nature of a colleague's work, but adopt willful ignorance so the research can be conducted without requiring the researcher to change the research design, complete protocol amendments, or experience multiple delays of his or her work (Bledsoe et al. 2007).

### Issues of Accountability

During the course of a single research project, a researcher may feel accountable to various parties, including funders, employers, colleagues,

assistants, research subjects or participants, themselves, and society at large. These competing obligations can pose dilemmas in terms of what is or is not ethically responsible.

The issue of researcher accountability depends in part on the researcher's view of science. In the essay "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," Max Weber (1917/1949) articulated a value-neutral approach to social inquiry in which a researcher is obliged first and foremost to develop knowledge about reality based on observed social facts. If a researcher believes that creation of objective knowledge is his or her primary obligation, then the role of objective and uninvolved observer is the ethically responsible and professionally legitimate one. This value-neutral approach has been challenged by many social scientists as problematic. Feminists, critical theorists, and action researchers point out that the object of study is inextricably bound up with the individuals doing the studying. In this light, social scientific representations are not unbiased truths but are imbued with the values guiding the research, the researcher, and the researched. If a researcher is skeptical of the distance between the observer and the subject of observation, the proper role of the researcher may not be to simply observe but to interact, even intervene.

An interview setting can be used to illustrate this issue. Take a situation where a researcher is interviewing parents about their experiences with health care professionals in a hospital setting. If the researcher has information that would help these parents better navigate the bureaucracy or better understand the needs of their child, what is that researcher's obligation? If he or she intervenes, then the social process may not unfold in the same manner and the intervention threatens the research. Are there alternatives that would balance the goals of the research with the obligation to the participants? Given that most social science researchers are not trained to offer advice or guidance on substantive issues outside of their particular area of expertise, an obligation to intervene in a productive manner would render much social research impossible.

The issue of researcher accountability should also be informed by disciplinary professional codes of ethics. If a researcher suspects that one of the subjects is extremely depressed, the researcher may or may not feel an obligation to help him find support. If the researcher suspects a subject is being physically abused or physically abusing someone else, the obligation to act might increase considerably. But in both of these situations, the decision is left to the researcher. Unlike physicians, psychiatrists, teachers, and social workers, there are no clear rules for social researchers or for journalists, social commentators, or historians, for that matter. It seems clear that lawyers are more involved in crafting these guidelines to ensure that the professional association or research

institution is legally protected. Ethics have been displaced by a fear of litigation. Take as a case in point this segment from the American Sociological Association's (1999) *Professional Code of Ethics*:

Sociologists may confront unanticipated circumstances where they become aware of information that is clearly health- or life-threatening to research participants, students, employees, clients, or others. In these cases, sociologists balance the importance of guarantees of confidentiality with other principles in this Code of Ethics, standards of conduct, and applicable law. (p. 10)

Let's turn to a case where the question of accountability shifts from the individual to the organizational level. In *The Basics of Social Research*, Earl Babbie (2008) discusses an ethical dilemma arising from his plan to collect data from law students about their legal education in order to make recommendations to law schools to improve legal education in the state of California: "[T]he plan was to prepare a questionnaire that would get detailed information about the law school experiences of individuals. People would be required to answer the questionnaire when they took the bar exam" (pp. 65–66). Babbie cancelled the project after a colleague pointed out that the law students would not be voluntary participants, and so the study was unethical. It seems like a clear-cut case; however, the California Bar Association also has a responsibility to those who will be using the services provided by those attorneys it deems qualified to join its profession. Studying law programs and determining areas of inadequacy are crucial to maintain the quality of legal practice in California. In this case, is the consent of the bar association, as a gatekeeper, sufficient to require individuals taking the bar to complete a survey about their legal education? Accountability to the legal profession could be viewed as sufficient rationale for requiring individuals who are seeking admission to the legal profession to complete a survey. These are not unwitting subjects; they are adults who are seeking to join an elite profession. Asking them to provide confidential information about their learning experiences to help improve the process, particularly if they are allowed to leave questions blank, seems reasonable. In fact, it could be viewed as negligent on the part of the California Bar Association *not* to take measures to improve the legal training in the state.

Researchers may find themselves in a double bind in which acting responsibly with respect to one party conflicts with what is needed to act responsibly toward another. Our next section focuses on the tensions surrounding a researcher's relationship with a subject or participant. These tensions are heightened when a research design calls for a high level of interaction with those being studied, such as with qualitative research.

## Relationship Between Researcher and Subject

For many research projects, there is interaction between the researcher and participant. (A few exceptions—archival research and meta-analyses—come to mind.) What, then, is a researcher's responsibility for the content or consequence of this interaction?

For certain types of research techniques, such as the survey, the researcher-participant interaction is often not given much consideration by the researcher. Perhaps more attention is warranted. Although less visible, even researchers using "less intrusive" methods are indeed interacting with, intruding on, and influencing participants. For example, a longitudinal study of children of divorced parents involves interviewing the children annually, through to adulthood, to assess their overall health, the health of their relationships with their parents, and the ways in which the children believe their parents' divorce affected them. When a large percentage of these children say their parents' divorce had a huge impact on who they are today, it seems reasonable to us that their participation in the recurring interviews could have influenced their responses.

Another researcher might be interested in children's perception of various social factors. The researcher devises a survey instrument to be given to children, with a school board's permission. Many adults will review and approve the survey questions. The most interesting and valuable questions are likely to be those that tap into complicated topics (e.g., social comfort in minority/majority settings). If a researcher exposes a child to a particular issue (e.g., his or her level of social comfort in a setting where he or she is a minority) that the child had not previously considered, then taking a survey is a far more meaningful interaction than it might appear on the surface. The question hinges on the degree to which we think these researchers are affecting the individuals and environments under study.

On the other side of the spectrum are researchers who immerse themselves in their field of study. Such researchers will have given these interactional dynamics considerable attention. In particular, they have focused on the consequences of being both an observer and a participant. There are a limitless number of ways to do fieldwork, ranging from "fly on the wall" observation at one extreme to full participation at the other. The closer to the participant end of this observer-participant continuum a researcher situates himself or herself, the more likely he or she is to get an insider's perspective. Developing the type of rich knowledge gained from immersing oneself deeply into a field site is a hallmark of ethnography. Intimate knowledge is seen as more authentic and valued. Ethnographers are often cautioned to remain partially outside so that they can critically assess and reflect

on their experiences. While this poses a dilemma for researchers, it is more of a professional dilemma than an ethical one. Yet from this tension arises a number of related ethical dilemmas with respect to reconciling the intrusion of oneself into people's lives. Researchers find themselves facing complicated questions such as how to conduct research on individuals or groups whose values, beliefs, or actions are considered by the researcher to be undesirable or amoral; how to protect the privacy of the participants and the information they provide; and how to manage relationships with key informants. These questions are often most pressing when the researcher fully immerses himself or herself into the field. Let's look more closely at them.

**Working With Undesirables.** In order for most people to share personal information about their lives with someone, there must be a certain level of trust. The process of gaining an individual's trust is referred to as **building rapport** among social scientists. The better a researcher's rapport with an individual, the greater will be the access to the underlying meanings the individual attributes to his or her ideas and actions. When the participants' worldviews and behaviors are judged as undesirable, even reprehensible, by the researcher, he or she faces an ethical dilemma: how to remain true to his or her own convictions while simultaneously building sufficient rapport so participants share details of their lives. Kathleen Blee (2003) was concerned about how her research with women active in neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, and Christian Identity organizations might give voice to these individuals and their causes. She also had concerns about her own safety, about her attention being seen as acceptance or tacit support for their racist views, and about the potential that her representation of the individuals within the world of organized racism might garner additional sympathy for their ideas. Blee had to balance these concerns with her goal of interpreting culturally significant phenomena, particularly in the closed groups she aimed to penetrate.

**Protecting Privacy.** Kathleen Blee (2003) did not worry about providing any benefit to those groups whose actions and ideas she found reprehensible. Her concern for those she interviewed was limited to protecting their confidentiality so that her field notes could not be used for prosecutorial purposes. In fact, some of the women did not want her protection. They wanted their informed consent forms modified to require her to use their real names. She refused to do so. Researchers who get to know their participants intensely may later be called upon to provide information about those participants' actions or statements. Ethnographers and anthropologists frequently write up extensive notes describing their observations, encounters, and initial reactions to what they experienced. They may also make audio and video recordings of events and interactions. These notes

and records can be viewed as valuable evidence when a legal dispute arises or when a criminal investigation is underway. The researcher may also be called upon to provide an eyewitness account of what he or she observed. In these situations, a researcher faces a difficult dilemma regarding the extent to which he or she should cooperate with the investigators.

For example, medical anthropologist Sheldon Zink spent over a year and a half with James Quinn, a patient who underwent experimental surgery to replace his fatally diseased heart with an experimental mechanical one. When Quinn's quality of life following the surgery fell short of what his wife felt had been promised during the informed consent process, she sued the mechanical heart maker and members of the hospital staff. Zink's field notes were subsequently subpoenaed by the defense attorneys. She refused to turn over her field notes on the grounds that it violated the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics and her First Amendment rights. She was present during Quinn's ordeal and his surgery so as to gather data pertaining to her research topic (which was how new technology affected organizations and individuals). Quinn agreed to Zink's presence because he trusted her to protect his privacy. She was faced with the prospect of being jailed for contempt or betraying his privacy (R. Wilson 2003).

While social scientists like Zink have been threatened with imprisonment for refusing to turn over their notes, we are aware of only two who were actually incarcerated, both for refusing to answer a grand jury's questions. In 1972, political scientist Samuel Popkin was jailed for a week (Meislin 1972). Popkin did not even know why he was called before a grand jury, which was charged with investigating the leak of a major governmental report. He further indicated that their questions did "not reveal a clear pattern of what they were after" (quoted in Meislin 1972). Sociologist Rik Scarce was jailed for 5 months. Scarce refused to answer questions about the activities of an animal rights activist whose organization Scarce had been studying during the period under investigation. Scarce (2005) has continued to advocate for a federal shield law, which would protect social scientists from subpoenas and imprisonment by providing a legal safeguard for all information obtained during a researcher's study.

There are several problems with the use of pseudonyms for the people and places being studied. In some research, particularly social history, a project is concerned with documenting and interpreting historical events. In these cases, the standard should be to use real names. Citing sources and attributing quotes to specific people is standard practice in journalism unless there is a compelling reason for withholding this information. Other research has the goal of giving voice to a particular group. The use of pseudonyms here may actually reduce the value of the research. Even without concerns for

historical preservation or other research goals, Mitchell Duneier (2001) feels that if he had used pseudonyms for his book on Greenwich Village sidewalk vendors, he would have had more to gain from this than the vendors. He argues that anonymity limits the ability of others to verify his accounts, and so using real names holds him “to a higher standard of evidence” (p. 348).

*Managing Relationships.* The last dilemma we will consider here, management of one’s relationships with participants, revisits the issue of accountability. Two factors within a research design play a role in how we might judge a researcher’s responsibility to a community or to a key informant. The first factor is whether the researcher is participating in an intense or meaningful moment in a person’s life (e.g., adoption of a child). The second factor is whether the researcher is immersing himself or herself in the field for an extended period of time (e.g., relocation to a gentrifying community). There are certainly cases where a social researcher is in the field when both factors are present, such as Sheldon Zink’s experience with James Quinn. Zink did not take her responsibility to Quinn and his family lightly. Prior to the subpoenas and 2 months prior to Quinn’s death, Zink switched from her role of anthropologist to one of patient advocate at the request of Quinn’s family (R. Wilson 2003). Some may view Zink’s decision to switch roles as evidence that she was no longer an objective observer and thus, her increased involvement in the case undermines her research results. Others may not even agree with us that there is any ethical dilemma. The degree to which a researcher has responsibility to people in the field, in particular those key informants with whom the researcher may have developed close friendships, will be viewed differently by different people. For those who see an ethical dilemma, it is intensified by a researcher’s willingness to fully integrate his or her life with those in the selected field site, his or her ability to fit in, and whether or not people remember or are reminded that the researcher is studying their lives.

The discomfort of being in the field in an intense fashion and the subsequent departure from the field are often personalized in ethnographic and anthropological accounts, instead of being seen as something commonly experienced within the profession. Since researchers view this tension as emerging from their personal and distinctive experiences, there is limited general discussion of this aspect of doing social research within the social sciences.

## The Problem of Representation

Let us consider one last issue at the center of the construction of social research: To what extent is the researcher’s voice and interpretation privileged

relative to those being studied? As a researcher observes, interprets, and analyzes social life, he or she is also making decisions with respect to what is included and omitted—what (or who) gets attention and what is ignored—in the final representation. Even those researchers who literally turn the camera over to their subjects often make decisions about what footage to include, in what order, with what accompanying sounds, and so on. How does the representation capture, omit, or suppress the diversity of voices, experiences, and meanings that emerged as part of the research process?

Some researchers view themselves as capable of capturing social life in an unbiased, undistorted fashion, and are often comfortable using their expert authority and observational skills in crafting a final representation. Yet many others are wary about determining what material gets included, what matters, and what it all means. They are concerned that this exercise of “power” might undermine their efforts to give voice to the subjects. These researchers view this problem of representation as an ethical dilemma.

Social researchers use their best judgment in terms of what to emphasize and what conclusions to include in their representations because “there is no way to stuff a real person between the covers of a text” (Denzin 1989:82). Furthermore, researchers continue to develop and use novel approaches for creating a “dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher” (Harper 2002:15). For example, researchers may review their work with the people they are studying prior to publication (as Mitchell Duneier did by reading passages to all the individuals who were discussed at any length in his book *Sidewalk* [2001]) and engage subjects directly in the interpretation of the evidence (as Douglas Harper did by asking those he was studying to provide their interpretation of various photographs in his book *Changing Works* [2001]). Regardless of whether or not a researcher views representation as an ethical issue, conveying an authentic portrayal of people studied is a high priority of most researchers, particularly those using a qualitative approach.

## Conclusion

Some researchers continue to do ethically questionable research in spite of the appalling history of abuse of human subjects, the current ethics review system, and the expansive literature on research ethics and ethical lapses. Hopefully, the most disturbing examples discussed in this chapter serve as reminders that social researchers are not above unethical behavior whether due to hubris, a misguided focus on self-interests, or an overemphasis on a “greater good.” Getting IRB approval is one way researchers have been

encouraged to consider the “worst case scenarios” for their subjects. The IRB process can encourage researchers to do a better job of adhering to ethical standards even for small, inconsequential studies. Yet the process is now dominated by a regulatory frame of reference emphasizing compliance. As a result, there are ethical issues with certain research designs that rightly should be addressed but are neglected. For example, issues of accountability and responsibility for relationships in the field are not addressed by the current system of oversight.

Social researchers must push for normative models centering on ethics rather than compliance. It is too easy for the process to be co-opted. A good example of this co-optation comes from looking at informed consent processes. IRBs initially required signed consent forms as evidence that participants were fully informed of what their participation would entail. Evidence of informed consent is still the stated purpose for the signed form; however, forms have frequently included language that serves to protect the institutions and researchers from liability. In spite of federal guidelines prohibiting the use of such provisions, some panels have moved so far from the initial charge of ethics review that they require projects to obtain approval from the university’s risk management and legal departments.

Ethical and professional standards are evolving. Some of the problems of ethical oversight are likely to be resolved by refining our practices. Henry Beecher (1966), the physician who exposed 22 unethical medical studies (including the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study), expressed doubt about formal rules for ensuring ethical research practices (p. 1360). We agree that the ethical and professional dilemmas mentioned in this chapter, along with the many others that arise from conducting social research, will not be solved by changes to the oversight system.

Just like non-scientists, social researchers will make questionable decisions they perhaps will later regret. Also, the problem of representation is not likely to have a single answer. There are many philosophical arguments associated with the ethics involved with balancing a researcher’s voice and interpretation with those of the people being studied. Some research decisions will be condemned and others debated. Just as with Venkatesh’s decision to play gang leader for a day, people will disagree on what is the right or wrong course of action for the many decisions facing social researchers.

With the increase in the number of cross-cultural studies being conducted, new dilemmas are arising (e.g., if local ethical belief systems conflict with those of the researcher, which system should take precedence?). Likewise, the increase in research involving new social media on the Internet has created more discussions around privacy, disclosure, and consent. No matter how comprehensive any given set of codes or rules, research projects take place

in different contexts in which various dilemmas will arise. It is ultimately up to social researchers, individually and collectively, to consider these research-related dilemmas and work to resolve them in a conscientious manner.

## Notes

1. For a detailed account of the Tuskegee Syphilis Trials along with other instances of gross mistreatment of African Americans by medical researchers, see Harriet Washington’s book *Medical Apartheid* (2008).
2. To learn about recent controversies with research involving children, see Chapter 4 of Lainie Ross’s 2008 book, *Children in Medical Research*.
3. Theodore Kaczynski (known as the Unabomber and hunted by the FBI for almost 2 decades until his arrest in 1996 for killing 3 people and injuring 23 by mailing bombs) was among the many Americans involved as subjects in MKULTRA-related projects. He participated in one of Henry Murray’s CIA-backed, stress-related experiments during his first year at Harvard University (Chase 2000). Given the pervasiveness of what is known and the destruction of the remaining records, conspiracy theories about MKULTRA and other CIA-backed experiments have thrived. For further discussion of what is known about MKULTRA, see John Marks’ 1979 book, *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate,”* which is based on the documents he eventually obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.
4. In 2006, Jerry M. Burger (2009) conducted a partial replication of Milgram’s study with some significant changes to attend to ethical issues. He found that obedience rates in his study were just slightly lower than those from the experiments conducted in the early 1960s.
5. In December of 2001, another prison experiment was conducted by researchers in the UK in conjunction with the BBC, which aired 4 one-hour programs based on the experiment. Like the Stanford Prison Experiment, this experiment was cut short because of concerns for the psychological well-being of the “prisoner” participants; however, many changes were made and safeguards put in place to ensure that the study was ethical (e.g., the researchers did not assume prison management roles; the prison was monitored around the clock; a separate committee could, by majority vote, call off the experiment if they felt at any time the participants were at risk; Reicher and Haslam 2006). These researchers argue that the participants’ shared identities and group memberships were the primary drivers of the behaviors on the part of the guards and prisoners during their study, in contrast to the Stanford researchers’ argument that the negative behavior by the guards in their study was due to the power inherent in their assigned roles.
6. Zimbardo continues to study the incremental process of dehumanization, which he views as a central mechanism explaining how ordinary people (like the Stanford students playing the role of prison guards and the military guards at Abu Ghraib) can participate in or fail to intervene in acts of atrocity. He devotes two chapters in his 2007 book, *The Lucifer Effect*, to understanding the abuses at Abu Ghraib.