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# What Is (and Is Not) Social Research?

## 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 housecleaners 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

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

results of their work to members of society. Thus, at a very general level, social researchers overlap with those whom they study and with the audiences for their work, and those they study—other members of society—also overlap with their audiences.

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

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

### Social Research Defined

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

The main concern of this chapter is what is and what is not social research. We first examine conventional answers to the question of the distinctiveness of social research. Most of these conventional answers are too restrictive—too many social researchers are excluded by these answers. Next, we compare social research to some other ways of telling about society to illustrate important similarities and differences. Too often, social researchers are portrayed as ivory tower academics poring

over their facts and figures. In fact, social researchers are quite diverse. Some have a lot in common with freelance writers; others are more like laboratory scientists. Finally, we argue that it is important to focus on how social researchers construct their representations of social life for their audiences, especially for other social scientists. By examining the nature of the representations that social researchers construct, it is possible to see the distinctive features of social research—the social scientific way of representing social life.

## Some Conventional Views of Social Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While formal properties are important, and almost no one other than social researchers studies them in depth, the investigation of formal properties today constitutes only a relatively small portion of all social research.

Many of the things that interest social researchers and their audiences are important, not because of their generic features such as their size or their degree of hierarchy, but because of their historical or cultural significance.

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

## What Is Society?

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

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

Many refusals are clear acts of defiance (Scott 1976, 1990). The prison inmate who starves himself to protest inhuman conditions may seem contradictory or self-destructive, but his body may be his only possible arena for self-assertion in a setting that imposes such severe restrictions. An apolitical act of suicide, which at first glance seems very personal and individual, is the ultimate refusal to do things together and thus falls well within the purview of social research. Émile Durkheim (1951), an early French sociologist, was one of the very first social scientists to argue that such refusals are inherently social. They have social causes, social consequences, and social meaning.

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

## Do Social Researchers Use a Special Language?

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

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

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

cities is through the variable *racial segregation* (the degree to which different races live in their own, separate neighborhoods).

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

To see if it is true that the most racially segregated cities have the worst public schools, it would be necessary to measure both variables, the degree of racial segregation and the quality of the public schools, in each city. The quality of public schools might be measured by average scores on standardized tests, graduation rates, or some other measure. Once the two variables are measured, it would be possible to assess the link between them—these two attributes of cities in the United States. Is there a correspondence? Is it true that the cities that are more racially integrated have better public schools? Is it true that the worst public schools are in the most racially segregated cities? In other words, do these two features of cities vary together, or "covary"? Social researchers use the term **covariation** to describe a general pattern of correspondence.

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

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

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

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

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

While some social scientists avoid using the language of variables, many *non*–social scientists use it regularly. Social researchers do not have a monopoly on the understanding of social life through variables and their relations. Many journalists use this language, for example, when they discuss differences from one situation to the next or when they talk about social trends and problems. For instance, a journalist discussing a recent outbreak of violence in a major city might note that cities with more serious drug problems also have higher rates of violent crime. Policymakers and others who routinely consume the writing of social scientists also use this language. Even politicians and ministers use it, especially when they warn of dark days ahead or the current trends that are ushering in unwanted or dangerous changes.

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

## Does the Scientific Method Make Social Research Distinctive?

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

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

Generally, a hypothesis involves the **deduction** of a specific proposition or expectation from a general theoretical argument or perspective. It is a mental act, based on existing knowledge. For example, a researcher might be interested

in the impact of occupation on voting behavior, especially the political differences between industrial workers who interact only with machines compared to those who must interact with other workers to coordinate production. In addition to the many studies of voting behavior, the researcher might also consult Karl Marx's (1867/1976) ideas about work and class consciousness presented in his three-volume work, *Das Kapital;* Max Weber's (1922/1978) ideas about social class in *Economy and Society;* and the ideas of contemporary scholars such as Seymour Lipset (1982), Erik Wright (1985), and Michèle Lamont (2002). After consulting all the relevant studies and theoretical writings, the researcher might derive a specific hypothesis: that industrial workers who interact more with machines vote less often than industrial workers who interact with other workers on the job, but when they do vote, they vote more consistently for the Democratic Party.

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

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

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

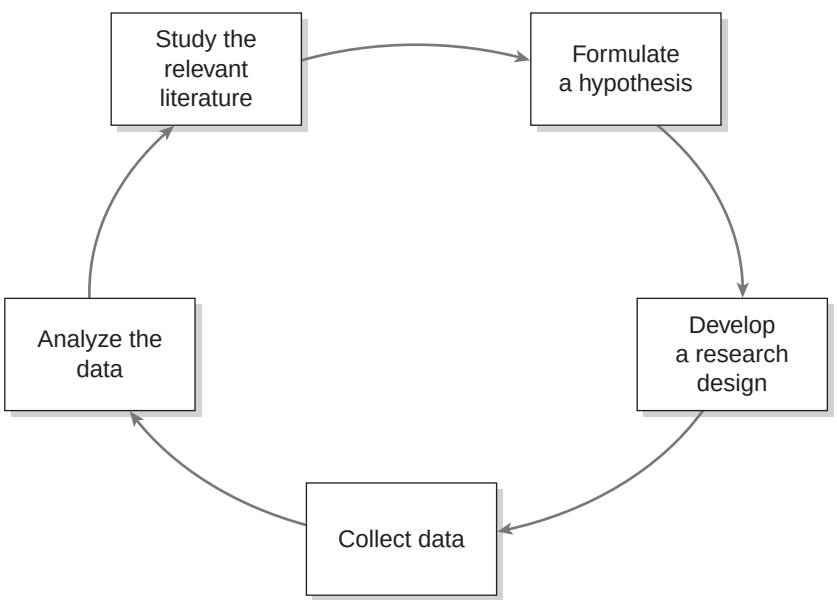
In the **scientific method,** deduction and induction work together. The hypothesis is derived from theory and from existing knowledge about the research subject. Data relevant to the hypothesis are assembled or collected, and the correctness of the hypothesis is assessed. The new knowledge that is generated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

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

For example, if one theory predicts that national economies subject to *more* government regulation (rules and restrictions on what businesses can do) should have higher economic growth rates when world trade slumps,

**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.