CHAPTER 1

Science, Society, and Social Research

Learning About the Social World

Avoiding Errors in Reasoning About the Social World

Observing
Generalizing
Reasoning
Reevaluating

Science and Social Science

Motives for Social Research
Types of Social Research

Descriptive Research
Exploratory Research
Explanatory Research
Evaluation Research

Alternative Research Orientations

Quantitative and Qualitative Orientations
Basic Science or Applied Research

Strengths and Limitations of Social Research

Conclusions

Looking back over the past 6 months, who are the people with whom you discussed important matters? Are you surprised to learn that one quarter of Americans said they had no one to talk to about important matters when they were asked this question in a 2004 survey? Are you concerned that the average respondent had just two such confidants? Do you think it's important to note that the average number of confidants was almost three as recently as 1985? These are the issues that concerned Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew Brashears (2006) when they studied social ties among Americans in 2004. The title of their subsequent article gives you an idea of what they found: "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades."

Of course, we all think about friends and family—about our social ties—every day. But McPherson et al. did not just reflect on their own experiences or ruminate about their own problems. They designed systematic research methods to investigate this issue in the social world, and they published the results of their investigation in an academic journal. McPherson and his colleagues thus contributed to the social science literature on social ties as well as to our understanding of social processes. In this chapter, I hope to convince you that the use of

research methods to investigate important questions about the social world results in knowledge that can be more important, more trustworthy, and more useful than personal opinions or individual experiences.

In this chapter, we will often return to the issue of social isolation in America. Learning about research on this topic as well as about other investigations of changing social ties will help you appreciate the value of research methods and the challenges that researchers confront. You will learn how investigations such as by McPherson et al. are helpful in answering questions about social ties and the impact of the Internet on these ties. By the chapter's end, you should know what is "scientific" in social science and appreciate how the methods of science can help us understand the problems of society.

LEARNING ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORLD

Just one research question about the social world raises so many more questions. Let's think about several more of the questions. Take a few minutes to read each of the following questions and jot down your answers. Don't ruminate about the questions or worry about your responses: *This is not a test*; there are no "wrong" answers.

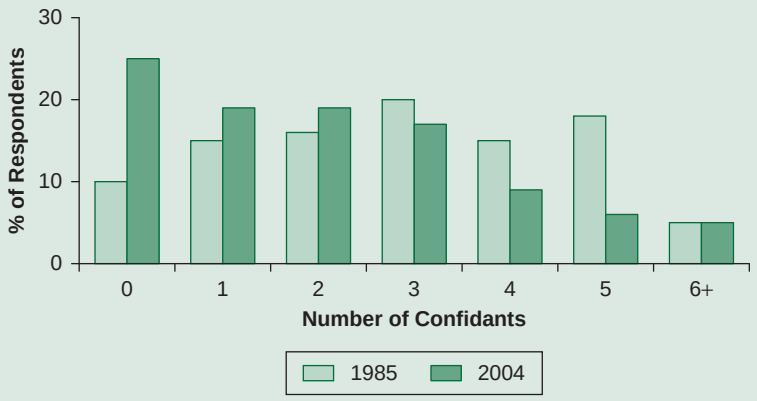
1. Do you have any close friends—"partners"—for discussing important personal issues?
2. How many close friends does an average American have?
3. Do family members serve as discussion partners more often than friends?
4. Is using the Internet associated with more or fewer close friendships?
5. Do social ties differ by age, gender, education, or race?
6. Can e-mail connections make up for problems with creating social ties between different kinds of people or across long distances?

I'll bet you didn't have any trouble answering the first question, about your own experiences. But the second question and the others concern "the social world"—the experiences and orientations of people in addition to yourself. To answer questions such as these, we need to combine the answers of many different people and perhaps other sources. If you're on your toes, you also recognize that your answers to these other questions will be shaped in part by your answer to the first question—that is, what we think about the social world will be shaped by our own experiences. Of course, this means that other people, with different experiences, will often come up with different answers to the same questions. Studying research methods will help you learn what criteria to apply when evaluating these different answers and what methods to use when seeking to develop your own answers.

Are you convinced? Let's compare your answers to Questions 2 to 6 with findings from research using social science methods (see Exhibit 1.1).

2. You have already learned the answer to this one: In 2004, the average American had 2.08 discussion partners, or "confidants." You also learned that this average had declined from 2.94 in 1985 and so you might speculate that it is even lower by now (McPherson et al. 2006:358).

EXHIBIT 1.1 Discussion Network Size in 1985 and 2004



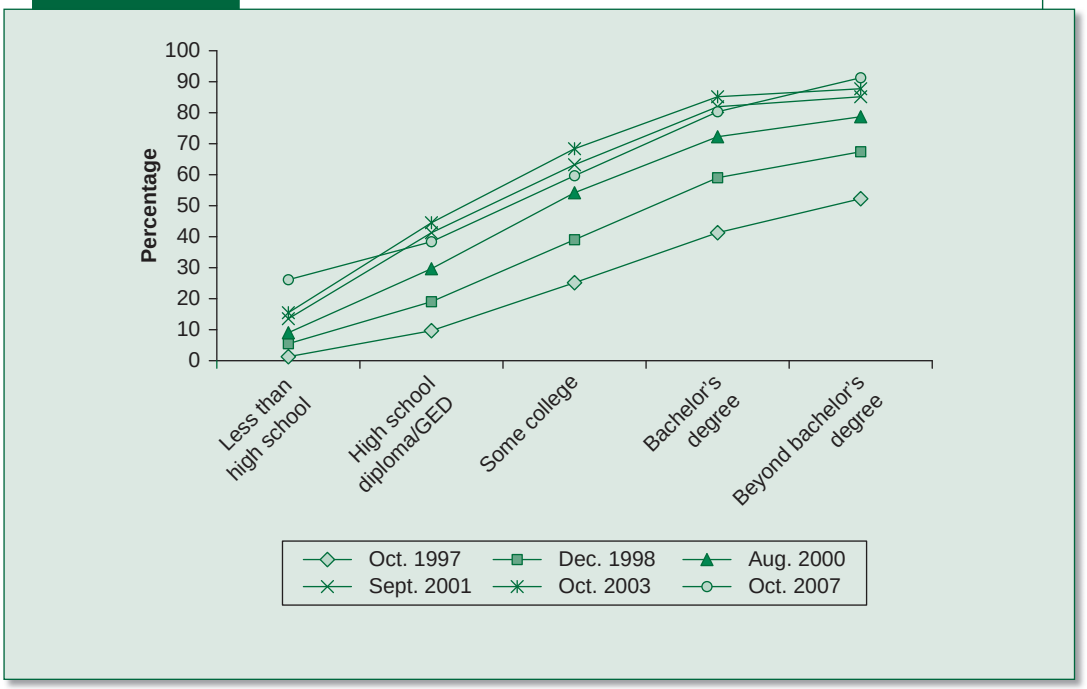
3. The survey of 1,467 American adults used by McPherson and his colleagues (2006:358) indicates that the average American in 2004 had 1.12 family members who they named as discussion partners, compared with 0.88 non-kin discussion partners. The average number of non-kin partners had fallen since 1985 quite a bit more than the average number of family (kin) partners.

4. The U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (National Telecommunications and Information Administration [NTIA] 2008a) found in October 2007 that there was at least one computer with an Internet connection in 61.7% of U.S. households. Internet users in all the 14 countries surveyed in the UCLA World Internet Project spend more time than nonusers in social activities (Lebo & Wolpert 2004:3).

5. The average size of social networks increases with education and is lower for black Americans than for whites. Social network size did not differ by age or gender in the 2004 survey of Americans (McPherson et al. 2006:363).

6. Internet use differs dramatically between social groups. As indicated in Exhibit 1.2, in 2007, Internet use ranged from as low as 25.6% among those with less than a high school education to 90.7% among those with education beyond a bachelor's degree—although Internet use has increased for all education levels since 1997 (NTIA 2008b). Internet use also increases with family income and is higher among non-Hispanic whites and Asian Americans than among Hispanic Americans and non-Hispanic black Americans. People who are 35 to 54 years old tend to use the Internet more than those who are either younger or older than that (Cooper & Gallager 2004:Appendix, Table 1). In a survey of rural residents in a Western region, Michael Stern and Don A. Dillman (2006) found that Internet usage could increase community participation. Keith Hampton (2007) reported that providing neighborhood e-mail lists increased social ties within several neighborhoods.

EXHIBIT 1.2 Internet Use by Education and Year, Percentage of Households



Note: Reports available online at www.bls.census.gov/cps/computer/sdata.htm

How do these answers compare with the opinions you recorded earlier? Do you think your personal experiences led you to different estimates than what others might have given? You have just learned that college-educated people have more social ties than others and that those with more education use the Internet more than those with less education. Do these factors regarding social ties lead you to be cautious about using your own experience as a basis for estimating the average level of social ties (Question 2)? How about estimating the propensity of people to turn to family members or others in times of need (Question 3)? Were your opinions about Internet use and social relations based in part on the way you and your college friends use the Internet (Questions 4, 5, and 6)? Do you see how different people can come to such different conclusions about social issues?

We cannot avoid asking questions about our complex social world or trying to make sense of our position in it. In fact, the more that you begin to "think like a social scientist," the more such questions will come to mind—and that's a good thing! But as you've just seen, in our everyday reasoning about the social world, our own prior experiences and orientations can have a major influence on what we perceive and how we interpret these perceptions. As a result, one person may see a person who is socially isolated as being typical of what's wrong with modern society, while another person may see the same individual as just needing some help to "get connected" with others.

AVOIDING ERRORS IN REASONING ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORLD

How can we avoid errors rooted in the particularities of our own backgrounds and improve our reasoning about the social world? First, let's identify the different processes involved in learning about the social world and the types of errors that can result as we reason about the social world.

When we think about the social world, we engage in one or more of four processes: (1) "*observing*" through our five senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and/or smelling); (2) *generalizing* from what we have observed to other times, places, or people; (3) *reasoning* about the connections between different things that we have observed; and (4) *reevaluating* our understanding of the social world on the basis of these processes. It is easy to make mistakes in each of these processes.

My favorite example of the errors in reasoning that occur in the nonscientific, unreflective discourse about the social world that we hear on a daily basis comes from a letter to Ann Landers. The letter was written by someone who had just moved with her two cats from the city to a house in the country. In the city, she had not let her cats outside and felt guilty about confining them. When they arrived in the country, she threw her back door open. Her two cats cautiously went to the door and looked outside for a while, then returned to the living room and lay down. Her conclusion was that people shouldn't feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors—even when they have the chance, cats don't really want to play outside.

Do you see this person's errors in her approach to

- *observing?* She observed the cats at the outside door only once.
- *generalizing?* She observed only two cats, both of which previously were confined indoors.
- *reasoning?* She assumed that others feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors and that cats are motivated by feelings about opportunities to play.
- *reevaluating?* She was quick to conclude that she had no need to change her approach to the cats.

You don't have to be a scientist or use sophisticated research techniques to avoid these four errors in reasoning. If you recognize these errors for what they are and make a conscious effort to avoid them, you can improve your own reasoning. In the process, you will also be implementing the admonishments of your parents (or minister, teacher, or any other adviser) not to stereotype people, to avoid jumping to conclusions, and to look at the big picture. These are the same errors that the methods of social science are designed to help us avoid.

Observing

One common mistake in learning about the social world is **selective observation**—choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs. When we are inclined to criticize individuals or institutions, it is all too easy to notice their every failure. For example, if we are convinced in advance that all heavy Internet users are antisocial, we can find many confirming instances. But what about elderly people who serve as Internet pen pals for grade-school children? Doctors who exchange views on medical developments? Therapists who

Selective observation Choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs.

Inaccurate observation An observation based on faulty perceptions of empirical reality.

deliver online counseling? If we acknowledge only the instances that confirm our predispositions, we are victims of our own selective observation. Exhibit 1.3 depicts the difference between selective observation and a related error in reasoning: overgeneralization.

Our observations can also simply be inaccurate. If, after a quick glance around the computer lab, you think there are 14 students present, when there are actually 17, you have made an **inaccurate observation**. If you hear a speaker say that "for the oppressed, the flogging never really stops," when what she said was, "For the Obsessed, the Blogging Never Really Stops" (Hafner 2004), you have made an inaccurate observation.

Such errors occur often in casual conversation and in everyday observation of the world around us. In fact, our perceptions do not provide a direct window onto the world around us, for what we think and we have sensed is not necessarily what we have seen (or heard, smelled, felt, or tasted). Even when our senses are functioning fully, our minds have to interpret what we have sensed (Humphrey 1992). The optical illusion in Exhibit 1.4, which can be viewed as either two faces or a vase, should help you realize that perceptions involve interpretations. Different observers may perceive the same situation differently because they interpret it differently.

EXHIBIT 1.3 The Difference Between Selective Observation and Overgeneralization

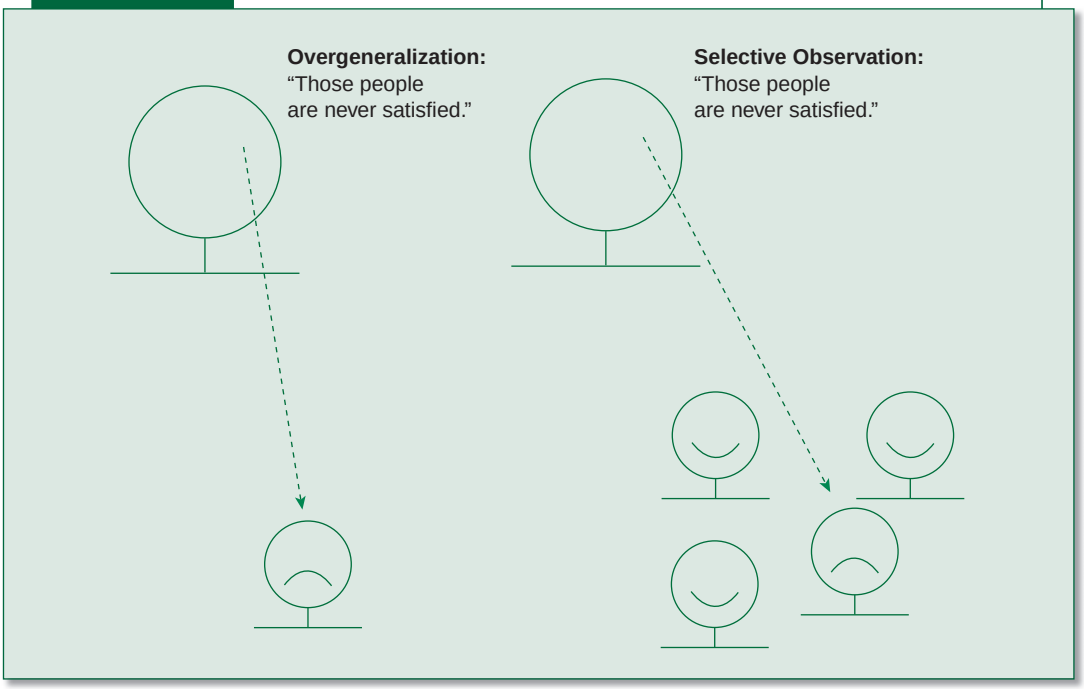
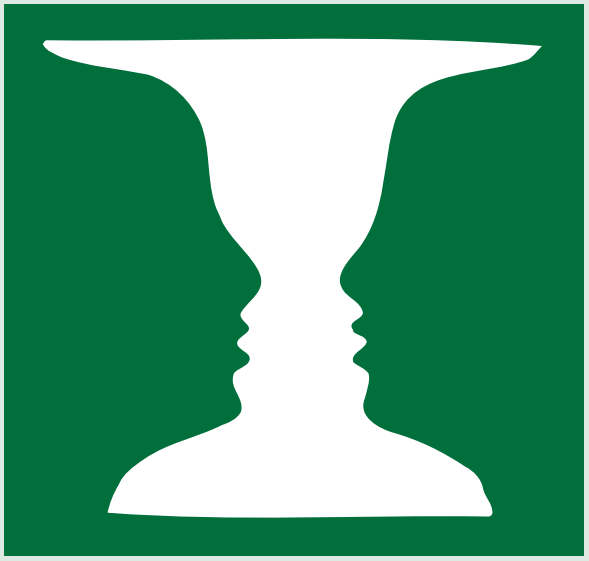


EXHIBIT 1.4 An Optical Illusion



Generalizing

Overgeneralization occurs when we conclude that what we have observed or what we know to be true for some cases is true for all or most cases (Exhibit 1.3). We are always drawing conclusions about people and social processes from our own interactions with them and perceptions of them, but sometimes we forget that our experiences are limited. The social (and natural) world is, after all, a complex place. We have the ability (and inclination) to interact with just a small fraction of the individuals who inhabit the social world, especially within a limited span of time. Thanks to the Internet and the practice of "blogging" (i.e., posting personal ruminations on Web sites), we can find easily many examples of overgeneralization in people's thoughts about the social world. Here's one posted by a frequent blogger who was called for jury duty (www.tonypierce.com/blog/bloggy.htm, posted on June 17, 2005):

Overgeneralization Occurs when we unjustifiably conclude that what is true for some cases is true for all cases.

> yesterday i had to go to jury duty to perform my civil duty. *unlike most people* i enjoy jury duty because i find the whole legal process fascinating, especially when its unfolding right in front of you and you get to help decide yay or nay.

Do you know what the majority of people think about jury duty? According to a Harris Poll, 75% of Americans consider jury service to be a privilege (Grey 2005), so the blogger's generalization about "most people" is not correct. Do you ever find yourself making a quick overgeneralization like that?

Reasoning

When we prematurely jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions, we are using **illogical reasoning**. An Internet blogger posted a conclusion about the cause of the tsunami wave that devastated part of Indonesia in 2004:

Illogical reasoning When we prematurely jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions.

> Since we know that the atmosphere has become contaminated by all the atomic testing, space stuff, electronic stuff, earth pollutants, etc., is it logical to wonder if: Perhaps the "bones" of our earth where this earthquake spawned have also been affected?

Is that logical? Another blogger soon responded with an explanation of plate tectonics: "The floor of the Indian Ocean slid over part of the Pacific Ocean" (Schwartz 2005:A9). The earth's crust moves no matter what people do!

It is not always so easy to spot illogical reasoning. For example, about 63% of Americans aged 18 or older now use the Internet. Would it be reasonable to propose that the 37% who don't participate in the "information revolution" avoid it simply because they don't want to participate? In fact, many low-income households lack the financial resources to buy a computer or maintain an online account and so use the Internet much less frequently (Rainie & Horrigan 2005:63). On the other hand, an unquestioned assumption that everyone wants to connect to the Internet may overlook some important considerations—17% of nonusers of the Internet said in 2002 that the Internet has made the world a worse place (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003:78). Logic that seems impeccable to one person can seem twisted to another.

Reevaluating

Resistance to change, the reluctance to reevaluate our ideas in light of new information, may occur for several reasons:

- *Ego-based commitments.* We all learn to greet with some skepticism the claims by leaders of companies, schools, agencies, and so on that people in their organization are happy, that revenues are growing, and that services are being delivered in the best possible way. We know how tempting it is to make statements about the social world that conform to our own needs rather than to the observable facts. It can also be difficult to admit that we were wrong once we have staked out a position on an issue. Barry Wellman (Boase et al. 2006:1) recalls a call from a reporter after the death of four "cyber addicts." The reporter was already committed to the explanation that computer use had caused the four deaths; now, he just wanted an appropriate quote from a computer-use expert, such as Wellman. But the interview didn't last long.

  > The reporter lost interest when Wellman pointed out that other causes might be involved, that "addicts" were a low percentage of users, and that no one worries about "neighboring addicts" who chat daily in their front yards. (Boase et al. 2006:1)

- *Excessive devotion to tradition.* Some degree of devotion to tradition is necessary for the predictable functioning of society. Social life can be richer and more meaningful if it is allowed

to flow along the paths charted by those who have preceded us. Some skepticism about the potential for online learning once served as a healthy antidote to unrealistic expectations of widespread student enthusiasm (Bray 1999). But too much devotion to tradition can stifle adaptation to changing circumstances. When we distort our observations or alter our reasoning so that we can maintain beliefs that "were good enough for my grandfather, so they're good enough for me," we hinder our ability to accept new findings and develop new knowledge. Of course, there was nothing "traditional" about maintaining social ties through e-mail when this first became possible in the late 20th century. Many social commentators assumed that the result of increasing communication by e-mail would be fewer social ties maintained through phone calls and personal contact. As a result, it was claimed, the social world would be impoverished. But subsequent research indicated that people who used e-mail more also kept in touch with others more in person and by phone (Benkler 2006:356). Excessive devotion to "traditional" forms of communication made it hard to see the potential in this new technology.

- *Uncritical agreement with authority.* If we do not have the courage to evaluate critically the ideas of those in positions of authority, we will have little basis for complaint if they exercise their authority over us in ways we don't like. And if we do not allow new discoveries to call our beliefs into question, our understanding of the social world will remain limited. Was it in part uncritical agreement with computer industry authorities that led so many to utopian visions for the future of the Internet? "Entrepreneurs saw it as a way to get rich, policy makers thought it could remake society, and business people hoped that online sales would make stock prices soar. Pundits preached the gospel of the new Internet millennium" (Wellman 2004:25).

Now take just a minute to reexamine the opinions about social ties and Internet use that you recorded earlier. Did you grasp at a simple explanation even though reality is far more complex? Were your beliefs influenced by your own ego and feelings about your similarities to or differences from others? Did you weigh carefully the opinions of authorities who decry the decline of "community"? Could knowledge of research methods help improve your own understanding of the social world? Do you see some of the challenges faced by social science?

Resistance to change The reluctance to change our ideas in light of new information.

SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The scientific approach to answering questions about the natural world and the social world is designed to reduce greatly these potential sources of error in everyday reasoning. **Science** relies on logical and systematic methods to answer questions, and it does so in a way that allows others to inspect and evaluate its methods. In this way, scientific research develops a body of knowledge that is continually refined, as beliefs are rejected or confirmed on the basis of testing empirical evidence.

Science A set of logical, systematic, documented methods for investigating nature and natural processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations.

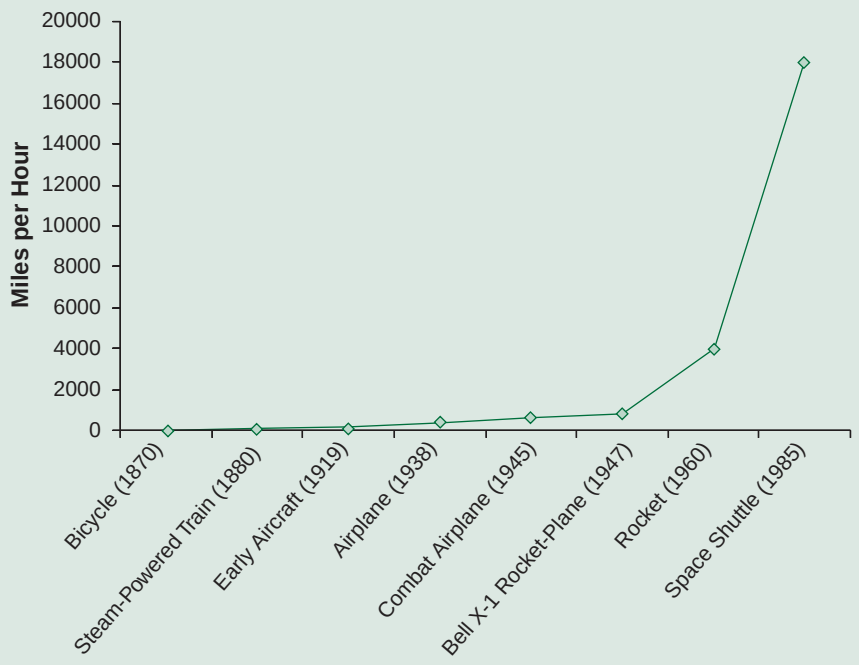
Exhibit 1.5 shows one example of the use of scientific methods: The rapid increase in transportation speeds as scientific knowledge in the past two centuries has fueled transportation technologies.

Social science The use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations.

Social science relies on scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes. It is important to realize that when we apply scientific methods to understanding ourselves, we often engage in activities—asking questions, observing social groups, and/or counting people—that are similar to things we do in our everyday lives. However, social scientists develop, refine, apply, and report their understanding of the social world more systematically, or "scientifically," than Joanna Q. Public does:

- Social science research methods can reduce the likelihood of overgeneralization by using systematic procedures for selecting individuals or groups to study that are representative of the individuals or groups to which we wish to generalize.
- To avoid illogical reasoning, social researchers use explicit criteria for identifying causes and for determining whether these criteria are met in a particular instance.
- Social science methods can reduce the risk of selective or inaccurate observation by requiring that we measure and sample phenomena systematically.
- Because they require that we base our beliefs on evidence that can be examined and critiqued by others, scientific methods lessen the tendency to develop answers about the social world from ego-based commitments, excessive devotion to tradition, and/or unquestioning respect for authority.

EXHIBIT 1.5 Maximum Speed of New Modes of Transportation by Year of Invention



Even as you learn to appreciate the value of social science methods, however, you shouldn't forget that *social* scientists face three specific challenges:

- The objects of our research are people like us, so biases rooted in our personal experiences and relationships are more likely to influence our conclusions.
- Those whom we study can evaluate us, even as we study them. As a result, subjects' decisions to "tell us what they think we want to hear" or, alternatively, to refuse to cooperate in our investigations can produce misleading evidence.
- In physics or chemistry, research subjects (objects and substances) may be treated to extreme conditions and then discarded when they are no longer useful. However, social (and medical) scientists must concern themselves with the way their human subjects are treated in the course of research (much could also be said about research on animals, but this isn't the place for that).

We must never be so impressed with the use of scientific methods in investigations of the social world that we forget to evaluate carefully the quality of the resulting evidence. And we cannot ignore the need always to treat people ethically, even when that involves restrictions on the manipulations in our experiments, the questions in our surveys, or the observations in our field studies.

We must also be on guard against our natural tendency to be impressed with knowledge that is justified with what sounds like scientific evidence, but which has not really been tested. **Pseudoscience** claims are not always easy to identify, and many people believe them.

Pseudoscience Claims presented so that they appear scientific even though they lack supporting evidence and plausibility. (Shermer 1997:33)

Are you surprised that more than half of Americans believe in astrology, with all its charts and numbers and references to stars and planets, even though astrological predictions have been tested and found baseless? (Shermer 1997:26). Are any of your beliefs based on pseudoscience?

Motives for Social Research

Similar to you, social scientists have friends and family, observe other persons' social ties, and try to make sense of what they experience and observe. For most, that's the end of it. But for some social scientists, the quality and impact of social ties has become a major research focus. What motivates selection of this or any other particular research focus? Usually, it's one or more of the following reasons:

- *Policy motivations.* Many government agencies, elected officials, and private organizations seek better descriptions of social ties in the modern world so they can identify unmet strains in communities, deficits in organizations, or marketing opportunities. Public officials may need information for planning zoning restrictions in residential neighborhoods. Law enforcement agencies may seek to track the connections between criminal gangs and the effect of social cohesion on the crime rate. Military leaders may seek to strengthen unit cohesion. These policy guidance and program management needs can stimulate numerous research projects. As Cooper and Victory (2002a) said in their foreword to a U.S. Department of Commerce report on the Census Bureau's survey of Internet use,

> this information will be useful to a wide variety of policymakers and service providers . . . help all of us determine how we can reach Americans more effectively and take maximum advantage of the opportunities available through new information technologies.

- *Academic motivations.* Questions about changing social relations have stimulated much academic social science. One hundred years ago, Emile Durkheim (1951) linked social processes stemming from urbanization and industrialization to a higher rate of suicide. Fifty years ago, David Reisman (1950/1969) considered whether the growing role of the mass media, among other changes, was leading Americans to become a "lonely crowd." Similar to this earlier research, contemporary investigations of the effect of computers and the Internet are often motivated by a desire to understand influences on the strength and meaning of social bonds. Does a "virtual community" in cyberspace perform the same functions as face-to-face social relationships (Norris 2004)? The desire to understand better how the social world works is motivation enough for many social scientists (Hampton & Wellman 2001):

> It is time to move from speculation to evidence. . . . The growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) introduces a new means of social contact with the potential to affect many aspects of personal communities. . . . This article examines . . . how this technology affected contact and support. (pp. 477, 479)

- *Personal motivations.* Some social scientists who conduct research on social ties feel that by doing so they can help improve the quality of communities, the effectiveness of organizations, or the physical and mental health of many social groups. Social scientists may become interested in the social ties as a result of watching the challenges their children face in middle school or after finding themselves without many friends after a career move. Exhibit 1.6 displays the Internet home page for a preschool. Can you imagine some parents or their children, in later years, developing an interest in social effects of Internet use as a result of exposure to such sites?

Types of Social Research

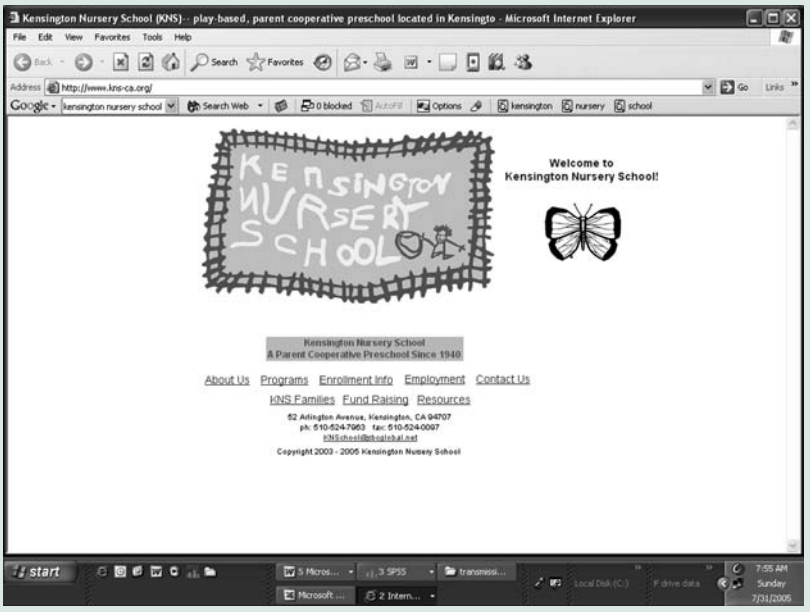
Whatever the motives, there are four types of social research projects. This section illustrates each type with projects from the large body of research about various aspects of social ties.

Descriptive Research

Defining and describing social phenomena of interest is a part of almost any research investigation, but **descriptive research** is often the primary focus of the first research about some issue. Descriptive questions asked in research on social ties have included: What is the level of particular types of social ties in America? (McPherson et al. 2006). What social and cultural patterns characterize disadvantaged neighborhoods? (Harding 2007). What types of social ties do Internet users have? (Nie & Erbring 2000). Measurement (the topic of Chapter 4) and sampling (Chapter 5) are central concerns in descriptive research. Survey research (Chapter 8) is often used for descriptive purposes. Some comparative research also has a descriptive purpose (Chapter 12).

Descriptive research Research in which social phenomena are defined and described.

EXHIBIT 1.6 The Internet Home Page for a Preschool



Example: What is the level of social ties in America? McPherson et al. (2006) used a recently completed survey of the American population (in 2004) to describe social ties in the United States and to allow a comparison of those social ties to what had been reported after a similar survey in 1985 (Marsden 1987). The survey they used, the General Social Survey (GSS), is administered in person every 2 years to a large sample of the noninstitutionalized English-speaking U.S. adult population. There were 1,467 GSS respondents in 2004 and 1,531 in 1985 (McPherson et al. 2006:358). You'll learn more about the GSS in Chapter 8 and by then you'll know that GSS respondents are selected so that they are very similar to the entire U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population. In Chapter 13, you'll also learn how researchers can use information obtained in surveys such as the GSS to conduct "secondary analyses" of issues in which they are interested. (Appendix A summarizes the design of the McPherson et al. study and the other studies discussed in detail in this book.)

McPherson et al. (2006) focused on GSS questions about "the people with whom you discussed matters important to you." The researchers identify these people as making up respondents' "core discussion networks"—"a close set of confidants who are probably routinely contacted for talk about both mundane and serious life issues, whatever those might be for a given respondent" (p. 356). Of course, these are not the only type of social ties people have, but this focus allowed a comparison with responses to the same question in the 1985 GSS.

You read about some of the study results at the beginning of the chapter: The researchers found that the average American had 2.08 persons in their core discussion network in 2004, a decline since 1985. This decline since 1985 occurred almost

entirely among non-kin network members (there was little change in the number of family ties). McPherson and his colleagues (2006) concluded that the average American is "much more likely to be completely isolated from people with whom he or she could discuss important matters than in 1985" (p. 372). They speculate that this decline may be due in part to increasing use of the Internet to maintain a larger number of social ties that are not so close.

Exploratory Research

Exploratory research seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn "What is going on here?" and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information or that take a field of inquiry in a new direction. For example, researchers investigating social ties occurring through the Internet have had to reexamine the meaning of "community," asking whether cyberspace interactions can constitute a community that is seen as "real and essential" to participants (Fox & Roberts 1999:644). "How is identity—true or counterfeit—established in on-line communities?" asked Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (1999:9). How can elderly people use the Internet to manage their heart conditions better? (Loader et al. 2002). Exploratory research such as this frequently involves qualitative methods, which are the focus of Chapters 9 and 10, as well as special sections in many other chapters.

Exploratory research Seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them.

Example: Can Internet resources help elderly persons manage heart conditions? The Internet provides a "space where disparate individuals can find mutual solace and exchange information within a common community of interest" (Loader et al. 2002:53). It is easy to understand why these features of the Internet "space" have made it a popular medium for individuals seeking help for health problems. Too often, however, elderly persons who grew up without computers do not benefit from this potentially important resource.

British social scientists Sally Lindsay, Simon Smith, Frances Bell, and Paul Bellaby (2007) were impressed with the potential of Internet-based health resources and wondered how access to those resources might help elderly persons manage heart conditions. They decided to explore this question by introducing a small group of older men to computers and the Internet and then letting them discuss their experiences with using the Internet for 3 years. Through the Internet, participants sought support from others with similar health problems, they helped others to cope, and they learned more about their condition.

Sally Lindsay and her colleagues read through transcripts of interviews and a guided group discussion with their participants. They then identified different themes and categorized text passages in terms of the themes and their interrelations. Two researchers read each transcript and compared their classifications of themes. These two researchers also discussed their interpretations of what they learned with their coauthors as well as with two of the elderly interviewees. For example, the researchers categorized one passage as showing *how the Internet could help reduce fear about participants' heart conditions:* "There's a lot of

information there. It makes you feel a lot better. It takes a lot of the fear away. It's a horrible feeling once you've had a heart attack" (Lindsay et al. 2007:103).

In general, 3 years after being introduced to the Internet, "the majority were more informed and confident about managing their health and had developed strategies for meeting their specific informational needs and making better informed decisions" (Lindsay et al. 2007:107).

The Internet provided these new users with both more knowledge and greater social support in dealing with their health problems.

Explanatory Research

Many consider explanation the premier goal of any science. **Explanatory research** seeks to identify the causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon. Internet researchers adopted explanation as a goal when they began to ask such questions as "Does the internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital?" (Wellman et al. 2001). "Do students who meet through Internet interaction like each other more than those who meet face-to-face"? (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons 2002:41). And "how [does] the Internet affect the role and use of the traditional media?" (Nie & Erbring 2002:276). I focus on ways of identifying causal effects in Chapter 6. Explanatory research often involves experiments (see Chapter 7) or surveys (see Chapter 8), both of which are most likely to use quantitative methods.

Explanatory research Seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon.

Example: What effect does Internet use have on social relations? Norman H. Nie and Lutz Erbring (2002), political scientists at the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, designed a large, innovative survey of Americans to answer this and other questions. They drew a random sample of 4,113 adults in 2,689 households across the United States and then gave every member of the sample a free Web TV, which was then connected to the Internet, also free of charges. The survey was conducted on the Internet, with respondents answering questions directly on their Web TVs.

The first study report focused on survey respondents who had already been using the Internet when they were contacted for the study. These respondents were questioned about their Internet usage, their personal characteristics and orientations, and the impact of Internet usage on their lives. Their answers suggested adverse effects of Internet use on social relations. The more time people spent using the Internet, the less time they spent for other social activities, even talking on the phone to friends and family. The heavier Internet users also reported an increase in time spent working both at home and at the office. Nie and Erbring also found what some might view as positive effects: less time watching TV, shopping in stores, and commuting in traffic.

Nie and Erbring (2000) were troubled by the results.

> E-mail is a way to stay in touch, but you can't share a coffee or a beer with somebody on e-mail or give them a hug. . . . The Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than television did before it. (p. 19)

But as more research evidence on Internet use has accumulated, it seems that the Internet can be "a catalyst for creating and maintaining friendships and family relationships" (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2001:8).

Evaluation Research

Evaluation research seeks to determine the effects of programs, policies, or other efforts to affect social patterns, whether by government agencies, private nonprofits, or for-profit businesses. This is a type of explanatory research, because it deals with cause and effect, but it differs from other forms of explanatory research because evaluation research focuses on one type of cause: programs, policies, and other conscious efforts to create change (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao 2004:337). This focus raises some issues that are not relevant in other types of explanatory research. Concern over the potential impact of alternative policies concerning the Internet provided an impetus for new evaluation research. Chapter 11 introduces evaluation research.

Evaluation research Research that describes or identifies the impact of social policies and programs.

Example: Does high-speed Internet access change community life? Netville's developers connected all homes in this new suburban Toronto community with a high-speed cable and appropriate devices for Internet access. Sociologists Barry Wellman and Keith Hampton (1999) used this arrangement to evaluate the impact of Internet access on social relations. They surveyed Netville residents who were connected to the Internet and compared them with residents who had not activated their computer connections. Hampton actually lived in Netville for 2 years, participating in community events and taking notes on social interaction.

It proved to be difficult to begin research in a rapidly developing community (Hampton & Wellman 1999), but a combination of household surveys and participant observation, supplemented by analysis of postings to the community e-mail list and special group discussions (focus groups), resulted in a comprehensive investigation of the role of the computer network in community social life (Hampton & Wellman 2000).

Hampton and Wellman found that Internet access increased social relations of residents ("Ego" in Exhibit 1.7) with other households, resulting in a larger and less geographically concentrated circle of friends. E-mail was used to set up face-to-face social events rather than as a substitute for them. Information about home repair and other personal and community topics and residents' service needs were exchanged over the Internet. Sensitive personal topics, however, were discussed offline. In fact, while wired residents knew more people within Netville by name and talked to more people on a regular basis than did the nonwired residents, they were not more likely to actually visit other residents (Hampton 2003:422). They also found that being wired into the computer network enabled residents to maintain more effectively their relations with friends and relatives elsewhere. Overall, community ties were enriched and extracommunity social ties were strengthened (Hampton & Wellman 2001).

ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS

In addition to deciding on the type of research they will conduct, social researchers also must choose among several alternative orientations to research. Some researchers always adopt the

same orientation in their research, but vary their orientation based on the research particulars. It's also possible to combine these alternative orientations in different ways. I will introduce alternative orientations in this chapter that represent answers to two important questions that must be considered when you begin a research project: (1) Will the research use primarily quantitative or qualitative methods, or some mixture? (2) Is the goal to accumulate new knowledge (basic science) or to make a practical contribution (applied research), or to do both? You will learn more about these alternatives in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I will introduce ethical principles and alternative research philosophies that should guide an entire research project.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

Did you notice the difference between the types of data used in the studies about social ties? The primary data used in the descriptive social ties survey were counts of the number of people who had particular numbers of social ties and particular kinds of social ties, as well as their age, education, and other characteristics (McPherson et al. 2006:363). These data were numerical, so we say that this study used **quantitative methods**. The Bureau of the Census survey (Cooper & Victory 2002b), the UCLA survey (Lebo & Wolpert 2004), Nie and Erbring's (2002) survey, and the Hampton and Wellman (2001) research also used quantitative methods—they reported their findings as percentages and other statistics that summarized the relationship between Internet usage and various aspects of social relations. In contrast, Loader et al. (2002) studied written comments—original text—in their exploration of the persons with diabetes using the online newsgroup. Because they focused on actual text, not on counts or other quantities, we say that Loader et al. used **qualitative methods**.

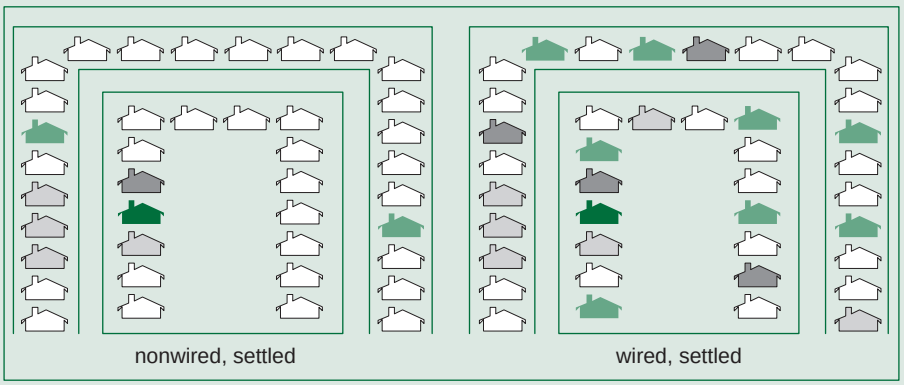
Quantitative methods Methods such as surveys and experiments that record variation in social life in terms of quantities. Data that are treated as quantitative are either numbers or attributes that can be ordered in terms of magnitude.

Qualitative methods Methods such as participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher. These methods rely on written or spoken words or observations that do not often have a direct numerical interpretation and typically involve exploratory research questions, an orientation to social context, and the meanings attached by participants to events and to their lives.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods involves more than just the type of data collected. Quantitative methods are most often used when the motives for research are explanation, description, or evaluation. Exploration is more often the motive for using qualitative methods, although researchers also use these methods for descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative purposes. I'll highlight several other differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in the next two chapters. Chapters 9 and 10 present qualitative methods in much more detail, and most other chapters include some comparison of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Important as it is, I don't want to place too much emphasis on the distinction between quantitative and qualitative orientations or methods. Social scientists often combine these methods to enrich their research. For example, Hampton and Wellman (2000) used surveys to generate counts of community network usage and other behaviors in Netville, but to help interpret these behaviors, they also observed social interaction and recorded spoken comments.

EXHIBIT 1.7 The Development of Social Ties in New Wired and Nonwired Neighborhoods



In this way, qualitative data about social settings can be used to understand patterns in quantitative data better (Campbell & Russo 1999:141).

Triangulation The use of multiple methods to study one research question. Also used to mean the use of two or more different measures of the same variable.

The use of multiple methods to study one research question is called **triangulation**. The term suggests that a researcher can get a clearer picture of the social reality being studied by viewing it from several different perspectives. Each will have some liabilities in a specific research application, and all can benefit from a combination of one or more other methods (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Sechrest & Sidani 1995).

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not always sharp. Qualitative data can be converted to quantitative data, when we count the frequency of particular words or phrases in a text or measure the time elapsed between different observed behaviors. Surveys that collect primarily quantitative data may also include questions asking for written responses, and these responses may be used in a qualitative, textual analysis. Qualitative researchers may test explicit explanations of social phenomena using textual or observational data. We'll examine such "mixed method" possibilities in Chapters 7 through 13, when we review specific methods of data collection.

Basic Science or Applied Research

You know that social scientists seek to describe and explain how society works. McPherson et al. (2006) sought to answer questions such as, "How do social ties vary between people or societies?" and "Why do some people, groups, or societies have more social ties than others?" Other researchers have investigated the meaning people attach to social ties and the consequences of having fewer social ties. The effort to figure out what the world is like and why it works as it does—academic motivations—is the goal of *basic science.*

Social research may also have more immediate, practical concerns. Evaluation research like that conducted by Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman (1999) seeks to determine whether one program or policy has a more desirable impact than another. This knowledge can then lead to practical changes, such as increasing community members' access to the Internet so that their possibilities for social relations will expand. Evaluation research and other social research motivated by practical concerns are termed applied research.

Do you think that doing applied research would be good for society as well as for social researchers? Or do you think that a focus on how to improve society might lead social researchers to distort their understanding of how society works? Whether you think you would prefer a basic or applied orientation in social research, you have lots of company. In the 19th century, sociologist Lester Frank Ward (soon to be the American Sociological Society's first president) endorsed applied research: "The real object of science is to benefit man. A science which fails to do this, however agreeable its study, is lifeless" (Ward 1897:xxvii).

But in 1929, the American Sociological Society President William Fielding Ogburn urged sociologists to be guided by a basic research orientation: "Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place to live. . . . Science is interested directly in one thing only, to wit, discovering new knowledge" (Ogburn 1930:300–301).

Tension between basic and applied research orientations has continued ever since these early disputes. Lynn Smith-Lovin (2007), who collaborated with Miller McPherson in the "social isolation" study, has argued recently for the importance of the basic science orientation: "I would, indeed, argue for knowledge for knowledge's sake" (p. 127).

In contrast, Robert Bellah, and his *Habits of the Heart* coauthors (1985) urged social scientists to focus explicit attention on achieving a more just society:

> Social science . . . whether it admits it or not, makes assumptions about good persons and a good society and considers how far these conceptions are embodied in our actual society . . . By probing the past as well as the present, by looking at "values" as much as at "facts," such a social science [as "public philosophy"] is able to make connections that are not obvious and to ask difficult questions. (p. 301)

You will encounter examples of basic and applied research throughout this book *Investigating the Social World.* By the time you finish the book, I know you'll have a good understanding of the difference between these orientations, but I can't predict whether you'll decide which one is preferable. Maybe you'll conclude that they both have some merit.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Using social scientific research methods to develop answers to questions about the social world reduces the likelihood of making everyday errors in reasoning. The various projects that we have reviewed in this chapter illustrate this point:

- A clear definition of the population of interest in each study increased the researchers' ability to draw conclusions without overgeneralizing findings to groups to which they did not apply. Selection of a data set based on a broad, representative sample of the

population enabled McPherson et al. (2006) to describe social ties throughout the United States rather than among some unknown set of their friends or acquaintances. The researchers' explicit recognition that persons who do not speak English were not included in their data set helps prevent overgeneralization to groups that were not actually studied (McPherson et al. 2006:356).

- The use of surveys in which each respondent was asked the same set of questions reduced the risk of selective or inaccurate observation, as did careful attention to a range of measurement issues (McPherson et al. 2006:355–356).
- The risk of illogical reasoning was reduced by carefully describing each stage of the research, clearly presenting the findings, and carefully testing the bases for cause-and-effect conclusions. For example, McPherson et al. (2006:357) test to see whether demographic changes, rather than growing isolation, might have reduced social ties in the United States.
- Resistance to change was reduced by providing free computers to participants in the Internet health study (Lindsay et al. 2007:100). The publications by all the researchers help other researchers critique and learn from their findings as well as inform the general public.

Nevertheless, I would be less than honest if I implied that we enter the realm of truth and light when we conduct social research or when we rely solely on the best available social research. Research always has some limitations and some flaws (as does any human endeavor), and our findings are always subject to differing interpretations. Social research permits us to see more, to observe with fewer distortions, and to describe more clearly to others what our opinions are based on, but it will not settle all arguments. Others will always have differing opinions, and some of those others will be social scientists who have conducted their own studies and drawn different conclusions.

Although Nie and Erbring (2000) concluded that the use of the Internet diminished social relations, their study at Stanford was soon followed by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2000) and another Internet survey by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (2001). These two studies also used survey research methods, but their findings suggested that the use of the Internet does *not* diminish social relations. Psychologist Robert Kraut's early research suggested that Internet use was isolating, but his own more recent research indicates more positive effects (Kraut et al. 2002). To what extent are different conclusions due to differences in research methods, to different perspectives on similar findings, or to rapid changes in the population of Internet users?

It's not easy to answer such questions, so one research study often leads to another, and another, each one improving on previous research or examining a research question from a somewhat different angle. Part of becoming a good social researcher is learning that we have to evaluate critically each research study and weigh carefully the entire body of research about a research question before coming to a conclusion. And we have to keep an open mind about alternative interpretations and the possibility of new discoveries. The social phenomena we study are often complex, so we must take this complexity into account when we choose methods to study social phenomena and when we interpret the results of these studies.

However, even in the areas of research that are fraught with controversy, where social scientists differ in their interpretations of the evidence, the quest for new and more

sophisticated research has value. What is most important for improving understanding of the social world is not the result of any particular study but the accumulation of evidence from different studies of related issues. By designing new studies that focus on the weak points or controversial conclusions of prior research, social scientists contribute to a body of findings that gradually expands our knowledge about the social world and resolves some of the disagreements about it.

Whether you plan to conduct your own research projects, read others' research reports, or just think about and act in the social world, knowing about research methods has many benefits. This knowledge will give you greater confidence in your own opinions; improve your ability to evaluate others' opinions; and encourage you to refine your questions, answers, and methods of inquiry about the social world.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope this first chapter has given you an idea of what to expect from the rest of the book. My aim is to introduce you to social research methods by describing what social scientists have learned about the social world as well as how they have learned it. The substance of social science is inevitably more interesting than its methods, but the methods become more interesting when they're linked to substantive investigations. I have focused attention in this chapter on research about social ties; in the subsequent chapters, I will introduce research examples from other areas.

Chapter 2 continues to build the foundation for investigating the social world. I review how social scientists select research questions for investigation, how they orient themselves to those questions with social theories, and how they review related prior research. Most of the chapter focuses on the steps involved in the overall research process and the criteria that researchers use to assess the quality of their answers to the original research questions. Several studies of domestic violence illustrate the research process in Chapter 2. I also introduce in this chapter the process of writing research proposals, which I then continue in the end-of-chapter exercises throughout the book. Chapter 3 on research ethics and research philosophies completes the foundation for our study of social research. I emphasize in this chapter and in the subsequent end-of-chapter exercises the importance of ethical treatment of human subjects in research. I also introduce in Chapter 3 alternative philosophies and guidelines that should be considered throughout a research project.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the issues in measurement, sampling, and research design that must be considered in any social research project. In Chapter 4, I discuss the concepts we use to think about the social world and the measures we use to collect data about those concepts. This chapter begins with the example of research on student substance abuse, but you will find throughout this chapter a range of examples from contemporary research. In Chapter 5, I use research on homelessness to exemplify the issues involved in sampling cases to study. In Chapter 6, I use research on violence to illustrate how research can be designed to answer causal research questions such as "What causes violence?" I also explain in this chapter the decisions that social researchers must make about two related research design issues: whether to use groups or individuals as their units of analysis and whether to use a cross-sectional or longitudinal research design.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 introduce the three primary methods of data collection. Experimental studies, the subject of Chapter 7, are favored by many psychologists, social psychologists, and policy evaluation researchers. Survey research is the most common method of data collection in sociology, so in Chapter 8, I describe the different types of surveys and explain how researchers design survey questions. I highlight in this chapter the ways in which the Internet and cell phones are changing the nature of survey research. Qualitative methods have long been the method of choice in anthropology, but they also have a long tradition in American sociology and a growing number of adherents around the world. Chapter 9 shows how qualitative techniques can uncover aspects of the social world that we are likely to miss in experiments and surveys and can sometimes result in a different perspective on social processes.

Chapter 10 continues my overview of qualitative methods but with a focus on the logic and procedures of analyzing qualitative data. You will obtain a richer understanding of qualitative methods, if you read Chapters 9 and 10 together. In these chapters, you will learn about research on disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, on work organizations, psychological distress, gender roles, and classroom behavior.

Chapters 11, 12, and 13 introduce data collection approaches that can involve several methods. Evaluation research, the subject of Chapter 11, is conducted to identify the impact of social programs or to clarify social processes involving such programs. Evaluation research often uses experimental methods, but survey research and qualitative methods can also be helpful in evaluation research projects. Historical and comparative methods, the subject of Chapter 12, may involve either quantitative or qualitative methods that are used to compare societies and groups at one point in time and to analyze their development over time. We will see how these different approaches have been used to learn about political change in transitional societies. Chapter 13 reviews the methods of secondary data analysis and content analysis. In this chapter, you will learn how to obtain previously collected data and to investigate important social issues such as poverty dynamics. I think that by the time you finish Chapter 13, you will realize why secondary methods and content analysis often provide researchers with the best options for investigating important questions about the social world.

Chapter 14 gives you a good idea of how to use statistics when analyzing research data and how to interpret statistics in research reports. This single chapter is not a substitute for an entire course in statistics, but it provides one with the basic tools you can use to answer most research questions. To make this chapter realistic, I walk you through an analysis of quantitative data on voting in the 2004 presidential election. You can replicate this analysis with data on the book's study site (if you have access to the SPSS statistical analysis program). You can also learn more about statistics with the tutorials available on the Web site.

Plan to read Chapter 15 carefully. Our research efforts are really only as good as the attention given to our research reports, so my primary focus in this chapter is on writing research reports. I also review in this chapter, the strengths and weaknesses of the different major research methods we have studied. In addition, I introduce meta-analysis—a statistical technique for assessing many research studies about a particular research question. By the end of the chapter, you should have a broader perspective on how research methods can improve understanding of the social world (as well as an appreciation for how much remains to be done).

Each chapter ends with several helpful learning tools. Lists of key terms and chapter highlights will help you review the ideas that have been discussed. Discussion questions and practice exercises will help you apply and deepen your knowledge. Special exercises guide you in developing your first research proposal, finding information on the World Wide Web,

grappling with ethical dilemmas and conducting statistical analyses. The Internet study site for this book provides interactive exercises and quizzes for reviewing key concepts, as well as research articles to review, and data to analyze.

KEY TERMS

Descriptive research
Evaluation research
Explanatory research
Exploratory research
Illogical reasoning
Inaccurate observation
Overgeneralization
Pseudoscience
Qualitative methods
Quantitative methods
Resistance to change
Science
Selective observation
Social science
Triangulation

HIGHLIGHTS

- Empirical data are obtained in social science investigations from either direct experience or others' statements.
- Four common errors in reasoning are overgeneralization, selective or inaccurate observation, illogical reasoning, and resistance to change. These errors result from the complexity of the social world, subjective processes that affect the reasoning of researchers and those they study, researchers' self-interestedness, and unquestioning acceptance of tradition or of those in positions of authority.
- Social science is the use of logical, systematic, documented methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes, as well as the knowledge produced by these investigations.
- Social research cannot resolve value questions or provide permanent, universally accepted answers.
- Social research can be motivated by policy guidance and program management needs, academic concerns, and charitable impulses.
- Social research can be descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative—or some combination of these.
- Quantitative and qualitative methods structure research in different ways and are differentially appropriate for diverse research situations. They may be combined in research projects.
- Research seeking to contribute to basic science focuses on expanding knowledge and providing results to the other researchers. Applied research seeks to have an impact on social practice and to share results with a wide audience.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

To assist you in completing the Web exercises, please access the study site at www.pineforge.com/isw6 where you will find the Web exercises with accompanying links. You'll find other useful study materials such as self-quizzes and e-flashcards for each chapter, along with a group of carefully selected articles from research journals that illustrate the major concepts and techniques presented in the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Select a social issue that interests you, such as Internet use or crime. List at least four of your beliefs about this phenomenon. Try to identify the sources of each of these beliefs.
2. Does the academic motivation to do the best possible job of understanding how the social world works conflict with policy and/or personal motivations? How could personal experiences with social isolation or with Internet use shape research motivations? In what ways might the goal of influencing policy about social relations shape a researcher's approach to this issue?
3. Pick a contemporary social issue of interest to you. Describe different approaches to research on this issue that would involve descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and evaluative approaches.
4. Review each of the research alternatives. Which alternatives are most appealing to you? Which combination of alternatives makes the most sense to you (one possibility is quantitative research with a basic science orientation)? Discuss the possible bases of your research preferences in terms of your academic interests, personal experiences, and policy orientations.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. Read the abstracts (initial summaries) of each article in a recent issue of a major social science journal. (Ask your instructor for some good journal titles.) On the basis of the abstract only, classify each research project represented in the articles as primarily descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative. Note any indications that the research focused on other types of research questions.
2. Find a report of social science research in an article in a daily newspaper. What are the motives for the research? How much information is provided about the research design? What were the major findings? What additional evidence would you like to see in the article to increase your findings in the research conclusions?
3. Review "Types of Research" with the Interactive Exercises lesson on the study site. To use these lessons, choose one of the four "Types of Research" exercises from the opening menu. About 10 questions are presented in each version of the lesson. After reading each question, you must choose one answer from the list presented. The program will evaluate your answers. If an answer is correct, the program will explain why you were right and go on to the next question. If you have made an error, the program will explain the error to you and give you another chance to respond.
4. Now, select the Learning From Journal Articles link, www.pineforge.com/isw6/learning.htm. Now open the files for the four articles and read their abstracts. Identify the type of research (descriptive, exploratory, or evaluative) that appeared to be used in two of the studies and explain you reasoning.

ETHICS QUESTIONS

Throughout the book, we will be discussing the ethical challenges that arise in social research. At the end of each chapter, we will ask you to consider some questions about ethical issues related to that chapter's focus. We introduce this critical topic formally in Chapter 3, but we will begin here with some questions for you to ponder.

1. The chapter began with a brief description of research on social isolation. What would *you* do if you were interviewing elderly persons in the community and found that one was very isolated and depressed or even suicidal, apparently as a result of their isolation? Do you believe that social researchers have an obligation to take action in a situation like this? What if you discovered a similar problem with a child? What guidelines would you suggest for researchers?
2. Would you encourage social researchers to announce their findings about problems such as social isolation in press conferences and to encourage relevant agencies to adopt policies encouraged to lessen social isolation? Should regulation about attempts to garner publicity and shape policy depend on the strength of the research evidence? Do you think there is a fundamental conflict between academic and policy motivations? Do social researchers have an ethical obligation to recommend policies that their research suggests would help other people?

WEB EXERCISES

1. The research on social ties by McPherson and his colleagues was publicized in a *Washington Post* article that also included comments by other sociologists. Read the article at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/22/AR2006062201763_pf.html and continue the commentary. Do your own experiences suggest that there is a problem with social ties in your community? Does it seem, as Barry Wellman suggests in the *Washington Post* article, that a larger number of social ties can make up for the decline in intimate social ties that McPherson found?
2. Scan one of the publications about the Internet and social relations at the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society's Web site, www.stanford.edu/group/siqss. Describe one of the surveys discussed: its goals, methods, and major findings. What do the researchers conclude about the impact of the Internet on social life in the United States? Now repeat this process with a report from the Pew Internet Project at www.pewinternet.org or with the Digital Future report from the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future site, www.digitalcenter.org. What aspects of the methods, questions, or findings might explain differences in their conclusions? Do you think the researchers approached their studies with different perspectives at the outset? If so, what might these perspectives have been?

SPSS EXERCISES

As explained in the Preface, the SPSS Exercises at the end chapter focus on support for the death penalty. A portion of the GSS 2006 survey data is available on the study site as well as on the CD-ROM packaged with this book (if you purchased the SPSS version). You will need a copy of the 2006 GSS to carry out these exercises. You will begin your empirical investigation by thinking a bit about the topic and the data you have available for study.

1. What personal motivation might you have for studying support for the death penalty? What might motivate other people to conduct research on this topic? What policy and academic motives might be important?
2. Open the GSS2006x file containing the 2006 GSS data. In the SPSS menu, click on File, then Open and Data, and then on the name of the data file on the CD-ROM drive, or on the C: drive if GSS2006x was copied there. How many respondents are there in this subset of the complete

GSS file? (Scroll down to the bottom of the data set.) How many variables were measured? (Scroll down to the bottom of the "variable view" in SPSS v. 13–15, or click on Utilities, then Variable List in earlier versions.)

3. What would you estimate as the level of support for capital punishment in the United States in 2006? Now for your first real research experience (in this text): Describe the distribution of support for capital punishment. Obtaining the relevant data is as simple as "a, b, c, d, e."
   a. Click on graphs.
   b. Click on Interactive then Bar.
   c. Swap the $PCT variable in place of $COUNT.
   d. Place the CAPPUN variable in the box below $PCT.
   e. Click OK.

   Now describe the distribution of support for capital punishment. What percentage of the population supported capital punishment in the United States in 2006?

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Will you develop a research proposal in this course? If so, you should begin to consider your alternatives.

1. What topic would you focus on, if you could design a social research project without any concern for costs? What are your motives for studying this topic?
2. Develop four questions that you might investigate about the topic you just selected. Each question should reflect a different research motive: description, exploration, or evaluation. Be specific.
3. Which question most interests you? Would you prefer to attempt to answer that question with quantitative or qualitative methods? Do you seek to contribute to basic science or to applied research?