The Nature of Social Science Research

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ASKING SOCIAL QUESTIONS, SEEKING SOCIAL ANSWERS

Despite enormous social and political changes in the way that Australian women and men engage with the labour market, the caring occupations remain largely feminised. Researchers continue to find that caring and femininity remain culturally linked in Australian society, theorising that gendered meanings are strong explanators for why female workers seek caring related employment in over-representative numbers. Kate Huppatz (2010), while concurring with the importance of gender, queried whether the research focus on gender was obscuring other differences between women in their motivation to pursue this type of work. She asked: Is class also a significant factor in the analysis of women's participation in the paid caring field? Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus as her theoretical frame on social class, Huppatz interviewed thirty-nine Australian women working or studying in the fields of nursing and social work, asking each to self-identify as either working class or middle class. Huppatz chose these particular professions as both are seen as middle class caring occupations. Her results indicate that class location is associated with differing motivations for undertaking caring work. For the middle class participants, the primary motivation was caring, and these respondents reported that their families were generally supportive of their chosen field of study or work. The women from working class backgrounds, while also citing a strong interest in caring as an occupation, were also motivated by employment stability, relatively high salaries and professional job social status. Moreover, many of these women reported that their families had not understood their career or study decisions. Huppatz concludes that '[E]conomic motivations, class identities and aspirations are therefore as significant as gender in these women's career choices' (130: 2010).

KEY TERMS

axiology
descriptive research
empirical data
epistemology
explanatory
  research
exploratory
  research
method
methodology
ontology
paradigm
quantitative–
  qualitative debate
research question
scientific method
social aggregates
social meanings
social patterns
social theory
standpoint
triangulation

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH?

The term 'research' evokes a popular imagery of a scholarly endeavour pursued using complicated formulas, and uninterpretable **language** and techniques. Research seems far removed from our everyday lives and our social world. But appearances here are deceptive. **Social research** makes the social world go around. Research, and especially social research, is everywhere, and it touches many aspects of our social lives. Essentially, social research is about investigating and seeking answers to the social questions that we and others ask about our social world. 'Investigation' is the key word here. To be good social researchers, we need to be keen social investigators, or even social sleuths. The constantly changing nature of our social world means that we will never run out of social questions to ask or social issues and phenomena to investigate. For example, results from the current *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (AIFS 2002) conducted by the Department of Family and Community Services, is already adding immeasurably to our understanding of contemporary childhood in Australia. This research influences government policy decisions around families and children, and some of the results are publicly disseminated through the documentaries *Life at One*, *Life at Three* and *Life at Seven*, shown on ABC television in 2006, 2008, and 2012. Similarly, the *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children*, the *Footprints in Time* project, also currently underway, shows how Indigenous children in Australia grow up strong. These two projects demonstrate the components of good social research: an important social question, a well thought-out and theoretically informed research plan, the use of appropriate research **methods** rigorously applied, valid analysis and interpretation, and broad dissemination of results and findings.

RESEARCHING THE SOCIAL

As social scientists, we compare ourselves directly with other scientists, often using many of the same methods and techniques. Yet researching the social world is often more complicated than researching the physical world. Social science research is research on, and with, real people in the real world, one of social research's exciting elements. The social experience and understanding we bring to our research as members of our society are also important ingredients of the research process.

The social nature of our field of study also means that much social research involves direct communication with our research respondents. This essential difference between social science and other science research, such as physics, biology or geology, is not given the emphasis it deserves. Effective people skills, that is, a genuine liking of interacting with others, ease in verbal and written communication, and, perhaps most importantly, listening skills, are vital but often underrated attributes for good social research. Here is a hypothetical example: Does it matter to an amoeba, or the research project, if the physical scientist investigating its properties cannot hold a coherent conversation with another human being to save herself? Probably not. Would the outcome be the same if a social science researcher were afflicted with the same deficit in the social skills department? How effective would that researcher be in conducting an unstructured, **indepth interview**, facilitating a **focus group**, or even designing an effective survey? Crucially, not only can the lack of appropriate people skills reduce the value of **data** gathered by whatever social research method, but poor people skills can also jeopardise the social research project itself.

As shown in Box 1.1, the human facet of social research can act as both an aid and a barrier to social research. On the one hand, our personal lived experience combined with

Language: A performative activity encompassing words, texts and other expressive behaviours.

Social research: The systematic study of society, the patterns in it and the processes that shape what people do.

Method: The research technique or practice used to gather and analyse the research data.

Indepth interview: Indepth interviews are guided by general themes rather than preset questions. They are also less formal than structured interviews, and explore issues as the interviewee raises them.

Focus group: A research method that involves encouraging a group of people to discuss some social or political issue.

Data: The information we collect and analyse to answer our research question. Data come in all manner of forms, such as survey forms, documents and secondary data.

our education and training as social scientists enables us to bring to our research a complex understanding of our social world. On the other hand, the fact that we are enmeshed in our social world means that we can often fail to see the social and cultural assumptions that inform our own worldviews, through which we perceive social questions and social issues.

BOX 1.1: RESEARCHING THE SOCIAL: A COMPLEX PROCESS

The human aspect of social research adds not only to the excitement but also to the complexity of our research endeavour.

ETHICS

We cannot research people or societies the way we study inanimate objects such as minerals or energy waves, no matter how useful that might be to our research. As detailed in Chapter 4, ethical constraints, from a moral perspective and, increasingly, from formal **ethics** bodies such as **human research ethics committees (HRECs)** set boundaries and limitations on how we approach and undertake our research. These are important to protect our human subjects from us as researchers, and perhaps as enthusiastic social researchers, to protect us from ourselves.

HUMAN AMBIGUITY, IRRATIONALITY AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

People and society are not always rational or predictable. The motives and rationales of people are not always clear, sometimes not even to themselves. This means that, although we can ask the questions, the answers we obtain from our respondents cannot necessarily be regarded as fact or unambiguous. Our social awareness also means that we are not always prepared to be frank in our discussions of our behaviour, attitudes and belief systems. We would not be surprised if, for example, a study of weight-loss program participants found a discrepancy between the self-reported eating behaviour of the respondents and the associated weekly weight loss. As researchers, we must recognise the essential subjectivity of much of our data, but not be paralysed by it.

SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CHANGE

People and societies are not static. Social and personal change are the norm, not the exception, and this is an important consideration in social research. While our research might provide a plausible explanation for today's social phenomena, this does not mean these same explanations can be directly applied to the social phenomena of tomorrow. Research on the career aspirations of married women in 1980, for example, would no doubt produce very different results to a similar study carried out in 2014.

CULTURAL FACTORS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Cultural factors and assumptions, our own rather than those of our respondents, can operate to blind us to some social questions and to some social answers. Until very recently most social researchers operated under the unquestioned assumption that Western science and Western society were the norm. Inherent, but undeclared, in this were gendered and culturally exclusive perspectives. More recently, other ways of knowing, such as Indigenous and feminist research paradigms, have successfully challenged these assumptions and shown that there are other ways of being in and making meaning of the social world. As a result, social research has become a richer and more valid enterprise.

HAWTHORNE EFFECT

The humanness of our research subjects can lead to particular social research dangers around validity. We need to be very careful to ensure that what we think we are measuring

Ethics: The establishment of a set of moral standards that govern behaviour in a particular setting or for a particular group.

Human research ethics committee (HREC): A committee established by an institution or organisation for the task of viewing research proposals and monitoring ongoing investigations with the aim of protecting the welfare and rights of participants in that research.

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is what we are actually measuring. In some cases, research results can be affected by the subject's interpretation of what the research is about—the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect was first identified in a study undertaken in the 1930s by Elton May at a Western Electrics plant in Hawthorne, Illinois, USA. The research was aimed at establishing if different independent working environments—related variables, such as lighting, length of meal breaks and how the workers were paid—would have an effect on the dependent variable, the workers' productivity. The problem was that every independent variable had a positive effect on productivity (to the initial delight of the researchers), but so too did a return to the original working conditions. The researchers finally concluded that the workers at the plant were interested in the research, enjoyed participating, and so tried to ensure that the researchers achieved the effects they were looking for. As noted by the Hawthorne investigator, unlike inanimate objects, people tend to 'notice that they are being studied and form feelings and attitudes about being studied, which may in turn influence the outcome of the research' (Dooley 1990: 212).

THE COMPLICATING SOCIAL CONTEXT

As social scientists, we use social theories to explain the phenomena we observe in the social world. This seems a fairly straightforward exercise, but we need to remember that social phenomena are not stand-alone events. Social phenomena are entwined within political and moral belief systems or ideologies, and this complexity leads to social research often having political and cultural dimensions. Social research that seeks to explore and explain rising rates of sole parenthood in Australia as a social phenomenon, for example, can clash with belief systems that view marriage and two-parent families as the only legitimate form of family. Alternatively, different ways of positioning, understanding, and interpreting a social phenomena (see Methodology) can result in different social researchers coming up with very different theoretical explanations or interpretations of the same topic, as shown in Case study 1.1.

CASE STUDY 1.1: WHO AND WHAT IS POOR?

Social research into poverty in Australia has, in recent years, been mired in a sometimes acrimonious debate about how poverty should be measured. This argument is more than just a contestation about where the poverty line should be set or how poverty should be defined. Different ways of measuring poverty deliver very different results. As outlined below, the preferred models of different groups tend to reflect differing ideological stances on whether poverty is a growing problem in contemporary Australian society.

In 2001, a study commissioned by the Smith Family, *Financial Disadvantage in Australia: 1990–2000*, was published. The main findings were that

- poverty had increased steadily from 11 to 13 per cent of the population
- unemployment was the key generator of poverty
- having a job was no longer always an effective protector against poverty, with the risk of poverty for those in part-time jobs rising.

This report's findings were immediately challenged by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). CIS argued that the study exaggerated the extent and nature of poverty in Australia. The major problem, argued CIS, was that the Smith Family study had used the **mean** (average) income rather than the less volatile median as the base for its poverty line measure. Also, CIS countered, the Smith Family study confused poverty and inequality. Rising inequality does not automatically increase poverty. In CIS's own estimates, only around 5 per cent of the Australian population were living in 'chronic' poverty in 2000.

Source: Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004: 35–40

Mean: The average score for a set of cases.

THE 'SCIENCE' IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Because our social world is all around us, it is often assumed that explaining social phenomena is just a matter of common sense. Yet being a member of a society definitely does not equate to an automatic understanding of our social reality. Indeed, as outlined in the previous paragraph on cultural factors and assumptions, being a member of society can, and does, act as an impediment to even asking some social questions. What sets social science apart from social commentary or opinion is our use of **scientific method**. Scientific method is traditionally defined as being about observation, classification, and interpretation. As mathematician Karl Pearson (1900) stated: 'The man who classifies facts of any kind, who sees their mutual relation and describes their sequences, is applying the scientific fact and is a man of science' (cited in Mann 1985: 19).

While today we would most definitely quarrel with Pearson's presumption of a social scientist as male, and substitute the term 'analysis' for 'classification', we recognise the essential sequence of tasks involved in social science research. Just as a geologist might explore rock formations, analyse what is found, and then theorise, based on this analysis, that the area was previously the site of volcanic activity, so social science researchers follow their social observations, whether they be hard quantitative data or softer qualitative research material, with analysis and theoretical interpretations of those social phenomena. Social science research is a planned methodical activity built around a solid, well-formulated research design.

Scientific method is also about the way we conduct our research. Neuman explains that scientific method is not just one thing, but that it 'refers to the ideas, rules, techniques and approaches that the scientific community uses' (2004: 8). These include professionalism, ethical integrity in how we go about the social research process, and ensuring that the social research we conduct is rigorous in method and techniques as well as transparent in research methods and interpretation. These aspects of scientific method mean that we endeavour to conduct our research, through all its phases, in a professional manner that abides by ethical principles. 'Transparency and rigour' refer to making explicit, at all stages of the research, the specific research method we use, the reasons for our choice and how we use our data to develop our theory or interpretations. The strength of these standards on how we conduct our social science research is that they are shared. Acceptance of, and adherence to, these standards within our research practice is a central element of being an active social science researcher, and a core defining element that sets social science apart from everyday thinking or other ways of knowing about our social world.

As social scientists, one of the key ways we ensure professionalism, integrity and transparency is by making our research public. As expanded in Chapter 16, publication of our results, usually in a recognised journal, makes our research open to public scrutiny. As an additional safeguard, most published research is subjected to a peer review process, in which anonymous, to the authors at least, social scientists review the research before it is published.

SOCIAL PATTERNS AND SOCIAL MEANINGS

Put into simple terms, our primary aim in social research is to identify, investigate, and seek to understand **social patterns** and **social meanings**. It is the persistent patterns in social life, as well as the social meanings inherent in these, that we are endeavouring to uncover.

Scientific method: Planned methodical research based around observing, analysing, and interpreting our research data, conducted with professionalism and ethical integrity, and transparent and rigorous in its approach.

Social patterns: Persistent patterns in social phenomena that occur repeatedly in the social world.

Social meanings: How people(s) make sense of aspects of their social lives and the understandings that they develop of these.

By social patterns, we mean those phenomena that occur repeatedly in social life. For example, research data finding that Australians with strong religious beliefs are consistently underrepresented among those who reside in a cohabiting relationship (Dempsey & de Vaus 2003) demonstrate an enduring social pattern. By social meanings, we mean how people make sense of aspects of their social lives and the understandings they make of these. Natalier (2001), for example, interviewed motorcycle riders to try to develop an understanding of the social meanings of motorcycling risk. Her results suggest bike riders downplay their risk by aligning adverse events of others and themselves with lack of technique rather than inherent risk in riding a motorcycle.

In its analysis of social patterns and social meaning, social research also has a debunking role: to test the veracity and sometimes expose the inaccuracy of our everyday assumptions about our social world. When we test these beliefs empirically using scientific method, we often find that the social reality and the social belief are not a good match. Health is a good example here. In Australia, which is generally perceived to be an essentially egalitarian and wealthy society, our health is perceived as an essentially individual aspect of our lives. Yet, analysis of health data shows that in Australia, as in other Western countries, health is not shared equally. Social research consistently finds that health status and socioeconomic status are strongly linked, and that there is a clear and widening health gap between low-income and higher-income groups. The poorer you are, the more likely you are to get sick and to die at a younger age; this applies right along the social gradient, rather than just to those at the extremes (Walker 2000).

Social theory: An idea or a set of ideas that explain social phenomena.

'But', you'll always hear someone say if you discuss the social gradient of health, 'I know somebody who came from a very poor family who lived till 105 and was never sick a day in her life.' The question here is whether an exception such as this challenges the **social theory** we have developed from our identification of social patterns or meanings, as those pointing them out often assume they do. The answer is a huge no. Exceptions—and there are always exceptions—are not a threat to social science findings nor, indeed, unexpected. Our interpretations or theories of social phenomena are not predicting what every single outcome for every single person within a society will be. Rather, as social scientists we deal with **social aggregates**, that is, the 'collective actions of and situations of many individuals' (Babbie 2002: 12), richer Australians, in aggregate, will have better health than poorer Australians, in aggregate. For social scientists, a single case, or even a group of cases, is just that until shown by rigorous analysis that a group of cases actually forms a social pattern. But once we have established that a social pattern exists, we need to look for a social explanation for that pattern, a theory of why and how this pattern manifests itself.

Social aggregates: The collective, aggregate social outcomes or circumstances of individuals or groups.

Social patterns also alter along with social life. If, for example, you are researching the family in Australia, one of the first things you will find is that the picture is one of continual change. The average age at first marriage, the likely number of children a couple will have, and the social meanings that are ascribed to marriage and children have changed repeatedly over time. Critically, you can expect that such changes in social patterns and social meanings will continue.

SOCIAL RESEARCH: WHY DO WE DO IT?

Exploratory research: Research undertaken to explore or open up new areas of social enquiry.

Why do we do social research? We do it because we want to know, and because knowing is important. For our social world to function well we need to understand it, and social research is the way we gain social understandings. The level of understandings we seek

will vary according to our question. Three core levels of social research are commonly identified (see, for example, Babbie 2002: 83–5, Glicken 2003: 14–15, Neuman 2004: 15).

These are

- **exploratory research**
- **descriptive research**
- **explanatory research**.

In reality, social research often does not fall neatly into one category of research or another. Rather, exploratory research can also be used to describe the social phenomena under investigation, and may also develop at least tentative explanations for what is found.

Descriptive research: Research that has as its major purpose to describe social phenomena.

Explanatory research: Research that seeks to provide or develop explanation of the social world or social phenomena.

EXERCISE 1.1: EXPLORING ILLICIT DRUG CONSUMPTION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Consider the following hypothetical research scenario.

You have been asked to be a research assistant in a project that is investigating the topic of the level of illicit drug-taking among university students. The respondents will be adult (aged 18 years and above) university students attending the three universities in a certain capital city. Although still in the development phase, the initial aims of the project are

- to examine illicit drug consumption behaviour
- to explore the social meanings that individuals ascribe to their illicit drug consumption.

These data will be used to generate a picture of illicit drug consumption among the student body and form the baseline for comparison data gathered every four years. The research method for the project plans to use a two-phase data collection. In the first phase, a telephone survey will collect the data from a random representative **sample** of students. The three universities have provided access to their student database as a sampling frame, thereby providing access to a combined student population of 36 000. In the second phase, a series of indepth interviews will be undertaken with twenty-five individual respondents.

Sample: A sample is a set of cases or elements that are selected from a population.

TASK

Answer the following questions, either as individuals or in groups.

1. Which aspects of illicit drug consumption might you want to investigate? As an example, you might want to determine the influence of peer pressure on drug-taking behaviour. List five dimensions of this social phenomenon that you think would be interesting to explore.
2. How would your own experience of illicit drug consumption (or lack of it) influence how you went about your task of determining what aspects of the topic to investigate?
3. Can you think of any immediate ethical concerns that might limit or constrain the way you conduct the research?
4. What factors around **ambiguity** and social awareness would you need to keep in mind when designing the study?
5. How might external events affect your study? Would a study that occurred before a series of items on high profile illicit drug consumption deaths on current affairs shows have different outcomes from one undertaken immediately following their screening?

Ambiguity: Vague or imprecise terms that have more than one meaning.

THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Like other scientific endeavours, social research uses a set of key terms and concepts. Many of these are unfamiliar or have meanings that differ from their everyday usage, but they are not inherently difficult. Rather, they form part of the language of social research,

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and most are just shorthand for broader ideas. The meaning of commonly used social science terms and concepts are highlighted and defined throughout each chapter, and set out as a combined set in the book's glossary.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

The previous sections emphasised the scientific, methodical aspects of social science research. Our approach, as social scientists, is clear, scientific, and objective—or at least this is the way social science research is often presented. But if social science is neutral, how and why are some social research projects prioritised over others? And why do different researchers interpret social phenomena so differently?

Our methodology is at least a part explanation of this complex and sometimes ambiguous terrain.

The distinction between **method** and **methodology** is an important one, and one that is often misunderstood. Very often, the term 'methodology' is used when people really mean the method. Understanding the difference between the two is an essential element of understanding social research. Put simply, method refers to a technique for gathering information, such as an interview, questionnaire, or documentary analysis, methodology is the worldview-influenced lens through which the research is understood, designed, and conducted. Our methodology includes our method, but the method is a component of our methodology and not even the most important.

Understanding the difference between a method and a methodology is important in understanding research for three reasons.
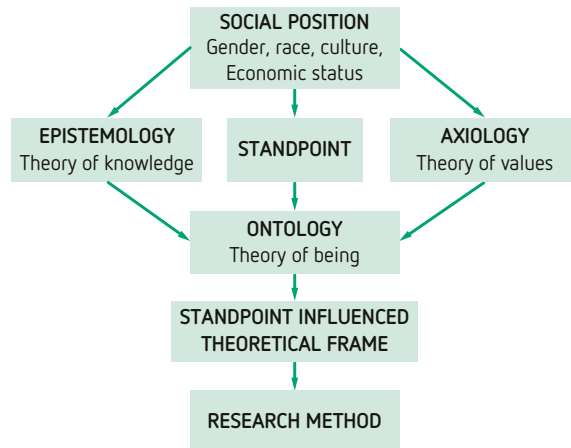
1   It enables us to see where values, theories, and worldviews interact with social research.
2   It enables us to understand how specific methodologies emerge and why understanding our methodology is vital to our research practice.
3   It enables us to view methods as tools, tried and tested ways, and techniques for gathering our data, rather than the research itself.

WHAT GOES INTO MAKING A METHODOLOGY?

Understanding methodology as the lens through which we view, undertake, and translate our research provides some level of explanation, but fails to adequately convey what a methodology actually is. Yes, our methodology has multiple components, method among them. But what else is included? How do we recognise a component? The specifics of methodology are less straightforward and more debated than method. My own definition is that methodology is the worldview lens through which the **research question** and the core concepts are viewed and translated into the research approach we take to the research. I include the following as core components. In practice, these elements are often inextricably entwined, but it is helpful to clarify each separately:

- our standpoint
- our theoretical **conceptual framework** and **paradigm**
- our method.

My conceptualisation of methodology is detailed in Figure 1.1 below.

Method: The research technique or practice used to gather and analyse the research data.

Methodology: Methodology is the worldview through which the research is designed and conducted. It is comprised of our standpoint, theoretical and conceptual frame, and our method.

Research question: Research questions state the major aim of the research in question form, specifying the key idea that the research seeks to investigate and/or explain, it also identifies the key concepts of the research.

Conceptual framework: The theoretical frame that we use to conceptualise the collection, and to analyse and interpret our data.

Paradigm: A shared framework of viewing and approaching the investigation and research of social phenomena.

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Figure 1.1:   Conceptualisation of a methodology

Source: Adapted from Walter and Andersen 2013

OUR STANDPOINT

Our **standpoint** is the most important aspect in defining our methodology, because it influences all other components. But it is also an aspect that, in most social research, is poorly addressed. Our standpoint is basically our own position, who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others and in relation to society. This means understanding that the researcher's position is highly relevant to the way they approach and understand the research. How we see the world is not a neutral, objective understanding, but is inevitably influenced by the filters and frames of our life experiences and circumstances and our social, cultural, economic, and personal identity location. This means that female researchers will have a different worldview on many topics than their male colleagues, younger people will likely see the social landscape differently to older people, and an Aboriginal researcher will see society and social research in very different terms to a non-Indigenous researcher. Our standpoint—who we are socially, economically, culturally, even politically—underpins the questions we see, the answers we seek, the way we go about seeking those answers, and the interpretation we make, the theoretical paradigms that make sense to us. Our standpoint is theoretically summarised as the way research is guided by researchers' social position and epistemological, axiological, and ontological frameworks:

- social position: shaped by gender, culture, race, economic position
- epistemology: theory of knowledge
- axiology: theory of values
- ontology: theory of being.

SOCIAL POSITION

Our **social position** sets the frame for our standpoint. Who we are socially, economically, culturally and racially, and who we think we are across those dimensions, underpins the research questions we see, the answers we seek, the way we go about seeking those answers and the interpretations we make, as well as the theoretical paradigms that

Standpoint: The way we see the world and our position in it in relation to others and society. Our standpoint recognises the filters and frames that have an impact on our approach to our research.

Social position: Who we are and how we see ourselves, socially, economically, culturally and racially. Our social position shapes how we understand the research topic.

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make 'sense' to us. Social position, therefore, not only substantially prescribes our life circumstances and experiences, it also shapes the worldview through which we understand these. In turn, these experiences and life circumstances influence how we comprehend our social position. Our gender, social, cultural, economic, racial identity, therefore, forms a central aspect of our methodology. Yet mostly its influence is largely invisible to us, and this is especially the case if our various identities are socially dominant, that is male, middle class, Euro-Australian, middle aged. Most of the influence of social position is internalised, it is how we understand and make sense of the world, and if our identities are mainstream it is more likely that we will perceive our own understanding of the world as 'normal' or, even more problematically, as 'natural'.

A researcher, therefore, can be consciously and genuinely egalitarian, libertarian, non-sexist, and non-racist but this does not equate to nullifying the impact of their class, culture, race, and gender on their worldview. Being a young middle class man, for example, will inevitably influence how a male researcher will approach social research with older female respondents from working class backgrounds. Or being a white Euro-Australian older woman will unavoidably methodologically impact on research practice with young Aboriginal men. We embody our social position and so, as researchers, it covertly or overtly, actively and continuously, shapes our research practice. We can and, of course, should, always actively try to understand the world view of our research participants, but such engagement blunts, not removes, the impact of our social position.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology: Theory of knowledge concerned with understanding how knowledge is defined, valued, and prioritised.

What we regard as knowledge has a strong cultural component. This concept is encapsulated by the term **epistemology**, which refers to a theory of knowledge—ways of knowing. Epistemology is concerned with understanding how the (mostly unwritten) rules about what is counted as knowledge are set, that is, what is defined as knowledge, who can and cannot be knowledgeable, and which knowledges are valued over others (Dooley 1990). As with social assumptions, dominant ways of knowing and the dominance of some knowers over others are embedded into our society. Social research is conducted against a background of these dominant ways of knowing.

Gender provides a good example of how our epistemology is influenced by our social location. Feminist social epistemology challenges the assumed objectivity and rationality of traditional ways of designating and valuing knowledge. This epistemology seeks to understand how the social relations of gender shape knowledge in our societies and investigates how socially constructed norms of gender and gendered experiences influence the production of knowledge and valid knowers. A feminist social epistemology also challenges the abstract individualism of social theories and theorists. Until the 1970s, most social theories and theorists were uncritically perceived as universal, a positioning that ignored that these knowledges were essentially all produced by white middle and upper class European and North American males. A feminist social epistemology illuminates that the experiential differences of knowers leads to differences in perspective, and that these differences have epistemic consequences. Therefore, the knowledges produced and the valuing of those knowledges become entwined with and influenced by the identities, social positions, and social locations linked to the attributes of the knowledge producers (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2006).

For example, German philosopher Karl Marx's theories of capital essentially relate to men's experience of the system, and the inequality and exploitation he exposes is also

that of men. Women's position and experience are not considered, except in their role as producers of the next generation of workers or as a reserve army of labour for the bourgeoisie to exploit. Yet, women's experience of the capitalist system is very different to men's, and much of that difference, in both experience and consequent knowledge, is based on gender.

Additionally, institutions of knowledge production, such as the stock market, the judicial system, and universities, can be dominated by the perspective of one type of knower without that perspective being recognised (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2006). Underrepresentation of women, younger people, and non-whites, or an overrepresentation of those from the upper and upper middle classes, means that knowledge is likely to be shaped by the epistemological perspective of those groups, perhaps even positioning such a perspective as the only way of knowing. The judiciary provides a clear example. With older, white Anglo-heritage upper class males dominating nearly all influential positions, the perspectives of those from non-English speaking backgrounds, the poor, women, and Indigenous peoples are only reflected, for the most part, in rulings as they are, for the most part, understood by those in positions of power. This is not to suggest that the judiciary is biased, but that without lived experience of the social location of immigrants, Indigenous people, poorer people and women, such understandings are inevitably limited and incomplete.

AXIOLOGY

Axiology refers to the theory of values, extrinsic and intrinsic. Applying this concept to social research and seeing how it fits within our methodology means that we need to understand our own value systems and those of the groups and institutions that have an impact on and are intertwined within our research approach.

Axiology: The theory of values that inform how we see the world and the value judgments we make within our research.

This link between a researcher's axiological position and their research raises the contested issue of values in research. A traditional perspective holds that researchers must aim to produce value-neutral knowledge based on observed objective facts. The feasibility and desirability of such an aim has been substantially challenged, and is mostly rejected by, contemporary social science researchers. The stronger argument in current social research debates is that social research cannot be value-free. The reasoning here relates to two key aspects of the social **context** of social research.

Context: The settings in which texts are situated.

1   Social science is part of the social world
     Social phenomena occur in the real world, where moral, political, and cultural values are an integral but often unseen part of the social landscape. This social context of our field of study means that being value-free is next to impossible, claiming a value-free perspective is just another value statement.
2   Social context is central to our social science
     The specific social, cultural, personal, and moral milieus of the social phenomena we study are inextricably entwined with those social phenomena. For a social researcher to ignore the social context of the research is similar to a physical scientist ignoring the laws of physics: you might still generate results and theories, but the value of these are highly suspect.

To gain some insight into our own axiological framework, we need to ask ourselves some reflexive questions, which can include the following.

•   Why have we chosen the topic we have?
•   What is our particular research question and why have we settled on that aspect?
•   How did we decide that the topic—as opposed to others—was worth researching?

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The critical point is that the questions we ask and the research decisions we make are not innate. Social scientists are embedded members of society too, and the non-acknowledgment of personal and/or social and institution values in the research does not equate to value-free or objective research. Rather, social research is about the real world in which moral, political, and cultural values are central to the things we examine. Therefore, being value-free is impossible, and those who say this are kidding themselves or disingenuous.

Acknowledging our axiological frame does not mean that it is valid to try to make our research deliver particular results. The research project relies on open and professional practice. We must always adhere to research rigour and the scientific process. Not to do so renders our research invalid, if not fraudulent. Rather, understanding our own axiology and recognising that values are implicitly, at least, embedded in all research enables us to read our own research and that of others with an eye to the values informing it. Indeed, in some research, such as discourse analysis (see Chapter 12), unearthing explicit and implicit values is the core focus of study.

ONTOLOGY

Ontology: The understandings of reality and the nature of being that inform our view of the world.

Ontology can be defined as theories related to the nature of being. Therefore, our ontological framework refers to our understanding of what constitutes reality, how we perceive the world around us. At its most concentrated it is about how the world is understood: what reality is.

As with axiology and standpoint, ontology tends to be little discussed, mostly because the nature of reality tends to be taken for granted, especially within predominantly Western cultures such as Australia. But as social scientists we know that reality is not quite as concrete and immutable as we might usually think. As demonstrated in the classic Australian film *The Castle*, the meaning and reality of a house is very different if you are the home owner as opposed to being the engineer planning a runway extension in your area. Similarly, perceptions and understanding of time completely change if we are talking about our own activities, lifetimes, specific events, or the theory of relativity. From inside a Western framework, with its taken-for-granted assumptions of reality, it can be hard to come to grips with ontology. But for other cultures, those that hold different understandings of reality, ontological frameworks are very clear because of the likelihood of a clash between their own ontology and dominant Western understandings. As with epistemology and axiology, it is easier to perceive ontological differences from outside the dominant culture.

In Australia and New Zealand, this is most clearly seen in the ontological positions of Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander people and Māori hold ontological understandings of the nature of reality that differ from Western norms. While unique to each Indigenous people, these ontologies tend to be more holistic in the way they view reality and less wedded to the Western presumption of humans as separate from other life and the earth itself. Scholar Karen Martin demonstrates this when she talks about her own Aboriginal people's ontology of relatedness. In Quandamoopa ontology, all experiences are anchored to relatedness, which is the set of conditions, processes, and practices that occur among all entities—human, animal, spiritual, and ancestral— and all aspects of nature—animate and inanimate. In Martin's words, 'relatedness occurs across context and is maintained within conditions that are: physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive' (2008: 69). The core message is that all social science researchers, whether from the

dominant or another culture, must try to recognise the ontological assumptions that frame their research topic and practice.

As Case study 1.2 shows, undertaking research developed from one culture's perspective can be an activity fraught with danger.

CASE STUDY 1.2: WHEN SYSTEMS COLLIDE

Australia's five-yearly census asks around forty questions about items such as household composition, cultural background, and key demographic details. From a mainstream Euro-Australian perspective, the questions appear clear, unambiguous, and basically value-free. Such assumptions come seriously unstuck when these apparently straightforward questions are asked outside their cultural frame.

Observations of the conduct of the 2001 census at an Aboriginal settlement in the Northern Territory highlight some of the pitfalls. Morphy (2002: 40) reports that both the Aboriginal interviewers and interviewees found the process strange—'they were Indigenous actors in a non-Indigenous scenario'. More critically, the quality of the data was compromised by the mainstream cultural assumptions of the questions, and the corresponding Indigenous lack of understanding of the mainstream culture and the intent of the census.

Examples of particular problems included the following.

*   How old are you?
    Almost no one knew how old they were by the exact date or year of birth. Rather, local terms are used which designate degrees of maturity or stages of life, such as baby, child, circumcised boy, pubescent girl, young man. While there are clinical records for some of the younger people, for many older people dates of birth are guesstimates, and often use 1 January or 1 July for official documents.
*   Place of residence
    'Place' was interpreted to mean 'community' rather than 'dwelling'. The community is seen as home, and the answers reflected identity rather than physical presence. Most answered 'Yes' to the question of whether they lived there most of the time, even if they were highly mobile. 'Staying' and 'Living' were viewed differently.
*   What is a household?
    Community residents saw themselves as part of a family, but this family rarely mirrored the nuclear model of parents and children, and was often spread across more than one dwelling. Kinship relationships within households also did not fit the mainstream Australian model, and could not be adapted to the census questions around relationships.

Overall, the Aboriginal interviewers took the task very seriously and endeavoured to complete the forms as best they could, but the quality of the data collected was doubtful. For a significant number of questions, Morphy (2002: 40) notes that a jocular approach was taken to ease the awkwardness, with 'jokes made at the expense of white people for wanting to know these things'.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In acquiring social research skills, the concentration on research methods and the collection of data means that it is easy to forget that social research involves two linked elements. These are:

1   **empirical data**
2   **social theory**.

Empirical data:
Information that is the result of observing and/or measuring social phenomena.

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Social theory: An idea or a set of ideas that explain social phenomena.

Social theory and empirical data have separate but interdependent roles. Each is an essential aspect of social research, and each is relatively useless on its own. While data finding, for example, a low rate of breast screening/mammograms among Aboriginal women are informative, alone these data are relatively meaningless. They lack a theoretical framework in which they can be understood. Alternatively, proposing that Aboriginal women are disempowered by the medical model and are reluctant to seek non-urgent medical care is an interesting theory. However, without empirical supporting data, it is essentially an unproven speculation. There is no way to tell whether the theory is correct. Put the empirical data and the social theory together, and what we have is social research.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical terrain is our conceptual framework. A conceptual framework is just that: a theoretical map for how we will conceptualise our data, its analysis, and its interpretation to answer our research question. The conceptual framework is the theory or theories that will guide our analysis and understanding of the empirical data. Which theory, or more often theories, we will use to provide this map emerges from our literature review. What theories have others used, or developed, when researching our or an aligned topic? Do they make sense to us and do they meet the requirements of our research question? An example helps illustrate what many new researchers find a challenging task. In my honours research I was interested in the topic of child support, and decided to focus on private collection, that is, collection of child support monies directly arranged between the separated parents, rather than by the child support agency. My question was: How satisfied are payee parents with their private child support collection arrangements (Walter 2002)? The topic and developing a clear research question was relatively unproblematic, but I struggled with defining my theoretical conceptual framework. My area was (then) new, and there was little existing literature, or theories, around the topic. After much reading I finally realised that feminist theories around the delegation of the family to the private sphere in social policy and family discourse were theoretically central to the topic and the question.

I am also often asked whether a theoretical conceptual framework is always necessary in social research. Can't we just identify the issue, such as low rates of take-up of breast screening services by Aboriginal women, then move straight into developing strategies to address the problem? The answer is most strongly no. As Babbie (2002) points out, no matter how practical or idealistic our aims, unless we have a theoretical understanding of the social terrain we are traversing, our research is likely doomed to failure. Even worse, the lack of an acknowledged theoretical base can disguise the unacknowledged concepts and understandings that inform our work. Operating without a clearly established conceptual framework significantly constrains the value of our work and undermines its validity and its rigour.

THEORETICAL PARADIGMS

Our conceptual framework is likely to be made up of a number of theories that influence our understanding of the topic. These individual theories can also often be aligned with a larger theoretical category, or paradigm, that encompasses a broad theoretical field that emerges from the same perspective. A paradigm is essentially a macro theoretical frame

of reference. Thus, for example, in my honours research noted above, the theories I used fitted within a feminist paradigm.

Within the social sciences, a set of established paradigms exists, within which individual social theories are often drawn and developed. A range of these is outlined below, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. Nor is it fixed. Social science paradigms are an evolving, developing landscape with new paradigms emerging, or re-emerging in their influence, or fading in impact. Refer to your social theory texts for a broader explanation of the key social theories that inform and influence social science research.

FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM

Functionalism was the dominant sociological paradigm through the mid twentieth century. Associated with the work of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and later developed by US sociologist Talcott Parsons, functionalism starts with a basic question: How is social order possible? It sees the answers in terms of stability, social order and consensus. The organic analogy, developed by Durkheim, is used to explain how society works by comparing the social world to a biological entity in which all parts are separate but interdependent. If one part is not functioning well, it affects the operation of the others and, therefore, the wellbeing of the whole social system. With its emphasis on the objective nature of social norms and values, functionalism in social research is associated with the social science research conducted within objective scientific frameworks.

CONFLICT PARADIGM

From a conflict perspective, social relations are based on exploitation, oppression, and conflict. The work of Karl Marx (1818–83), who focused on the struggle of the economic classes, especially the exploitation of the working class or proletariat by the capitalist class, forms the basis of conflict perspective. However, the application of a conflict paradigm now encompasses more than just economic oppression, and is used to examine social struggles based around class and ethnic divisions or wherever a conflict of interest occurs among different social groups (Babbie 2002:30). A conflict perspective begins from the notion of society as inherently unequal, and engaged in ongoing conflict around the competing interests of different social groups. It is this conflict and the consequent relations of power that exist between different groups that determine a society's social arrangements and drive social change. Social research framed or developed within a conflict paradigm tends to examine social phenomena in terms of who benefits from this set of social arrangements or this social change, and who is disadvantaged. A conflict perspective provides a big-picture, macro-perspective of society or larger social groups. Research using a conflict perspective frame, therefore, tends to be associated with large-scale, often quantitative, research methods, such as surveys (see Chapter 6).

INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM

An interpretivist paradigm concentrates on social agency, and is concerned with the way we, as social beings, interrelate and interact in society. Developed initially from the work of German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), the interpretivist perspective emphasises the meanings individual actors give to social interactions, and the use of symbols, such as language, in the creation of that meaning. From an interpretivist perspective, the human world is a world of meaning in which our actions take place on the basis of shared understandings. To understand society, we need to understand people's motives and interpretations of the world. The meanings actors give to their circumstances are the

explanation of what they do. The micro-level emphasis of the interpretivist paradigm and its focus on the role of meanings in how individuals interpret social life mean that the interpretivist paradigm is fundamentally associated with qualitative social research methods, such as indepth interviews (see Chapter 10).

FEMINIST PARADIGM

Feminist paradigms are developed by feminist scholars to counteract what has been an overwhelming male-centric approach to the study of our social world. Until relatively recent times, women were largely ignored in the social sciences, both as researchers and as social subjects. Women's differing experiences of social reality were essentially invisible in mainstream social science research and theory. Although feminist paradigms see gender as a fundamental social division and signifier of life chances, there exist a number of feminist paradigms rather than a single perspective. There is no single feminist approach to social research, and feminist paradigms have been used as the theoretical frame for a diverse range of social research methods and projects. Rather, a feminist perspective is more likely to inform the social question that is posed and how the topic is defined. However, because of the feminist challenge to traditional social research paradigm claims of objectivity and reason, feminist paradigms are often associated with qualitative research methods such as **ethnography**, life histories, and **memory work**.

INDIGENOUS PARADIGM

Here, the theoretical framework that directs the questions, the choice of methods, the way of studying, and what is valued as knowledge is determined from an Indigenous perspective. The Indigenous paradigm directly challenges many of the traditional Western ways of thinking about and approaching social research, what the research process should look like, and what the research **outcomes** should be. The research techniques used within an Indigenous research paradigm have generally been those that can more easily admit Indigenous agendas and Indigenous community interests to their purpose and practice (Tuhiwai Smith 1999) but can include any method. The applied research framework of **participatory action research** (see online module), which emphasises the relocation of the power in the research relationship from the researcher to the researched, means that this social research method is frequently employed by researchers approaching their work from an Indigenous paradigm.

POSTMODERNISM

The postmodernist paradigm has had a strong influence on the social sciences in recent years. Associated with the work of French philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, reality, from a postmodern perspective, is always a subjective experience and, essentially, constructed. Rather than observable social phenomena, social reality is fragmented and diverse, and all human knowledge and experience is relative. As a result, there are no absolute values or truths, and it becomes impossible to study objective realities. While a postmodernist paradigm brings into sharp relief many of the unsupported assumptions of a positivistic model, such as the provability of an **hypothesis** about the social world or the objectivity of social data, it also raises a social research dilemma. If all reality, or social phenomena, are fundamentally subjective then, from a postmodern paradigm, what is the point of undertaking any social research at all?

Ethnography: A research method that involves conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

Memory work: Memory work is a collaborative technique used to generate stories that are based on personal memories among a group of co-researchers: see also *Triggers.*

Outcomes: The specific consequences of a particular course of action.

Participatory action research: A cyclical research process aimed at providing feedback into a cycle for problem solving. It is a practical research method that requires an equal and open collaboration between the researcher and the research community.

Hypothesis: Hypotheses are prescriptive forms of research question that state a particular scenario that the research will confirm or refute.

METHOD

The final component of your methodology is the research method you choose, the core topic of this book. As stated, our research method is the technique or practice we use to gather our research data, such as an indepth interview, survey or discourse analysis. Indeed, social science researchers are spoilt for choice in their selection of a social research method. This book and the online chapters cover a wide selection of the methods in common use by Australian social science researchers, but this range is by no means complete. How to go about selecting your research method is covered in the next chapter, but it is important to remember two key premises in relation to method selection:

1   The method must suit the research topic and question, not the other way around.
2   All methods have strengths and weaknesses. There are no such things as good methods, bad methods or even methods that cannot be used within particular types of research.

VOICES IN THE FIELD: KAREN MARTIN

Karen Martin is an associate professor in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University. The following paragraphs outline how she developed an Indigenous methodology for her now completed doctoral research.

> My professional background is in early childhood education, particularly Aboriginal education. It is through my teaching that I developed a keen interest in knowledge acquisition and how transfer occurs in Aboriginal teaching–learning contexts (in homes and classrooms). It is also through the experiences of a native title application that procedures for research caught my attention, particularly in the way the knowledge and realities of Aboriginal people were represented, misrepresented, distorted, and sometimes stolen. Thus began a journey of understanding research and how this misrepresentation occurs, but equally how it could be different and have better outcomes for Aboriginal people.
>
> I theorised an Indigenist research methodology informed by an Aboriginal worldview, knowledge, and ethics. Underpinning this methodology is relatedness, a term I developed that theorises the essential and core condition by which Aboriginal people have lived, do and will continue to live. This is articulated within the research through the use of 'traditional devices' whereby Aboriginal ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing are centred and strengthened.
>
> This Indigenist research methodology was used in a PhD study regarding the regulation of outsiders by rainforest Aboriginal peoples of far north Queensland. The findings reveal the multiple forms of agency that exist and are used to regulate outsiders occurring from the past, to the present, and for the future. Therefore, the necessity for researchers to regulate their own behaviours in respect of and in accordance with Aboriginal terms of reference and in relatedness is paramount. When research is regarded as an interface of Aboriginal people, research, and researchers, Aboriginal voices are not erased, silenced, or diminished. This research becomes a vehicle for getting our stories back.

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QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE

In a return to the first message of this section, qualitative or quantitative methods are not the same as qualitative or quantitative methodologies, although we will almost certainly use a qualitative method within a qualitative methodology and a quantitative method within a quantitative methodology. Also remember that there are many more social research methods available to you than those listed in this text. Social research methods is a dynamic field, within which new methods are emerging, and the use of others waxes and wanes. The website accompanying this text, www.oup.com.au/orc/walter, provides core information on a range of other methods. On quantitative methods, the website contains two extension segments, quantitative analysis using SPSS 1: correlations, and quantitative analysis using SPSS 2: comparison of means. Qualitative modules include conversation analysis, action research, memory work, and the emerging field of sensory and visual research methods.

QUANTITATIVE METHODS

Quantitative research involves the collection and analysis of data that can be presented numerically, or codified and subjected to statistical testing. Its primary role is to allow the collection, analysis and development of understandings and interpretations of data on social phenomena from large groups or large data sources. Quantitative research is commonly associated with standard Western research scientific methods, but this association is limited to the shared usage of statistical analysis to demonstrate and measure associations between different concepts. Quantitative methods can be incorporated into a range of methodologies. Major quantitative methods include gathering data through surveys, questionnaires, and structured interviews.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

The key task of qualitative research is meaning making, a process that does not usually require statistics or large-scale data. Instead, the key focus in qualitative research tends to be on smaller units of people and society, with the method and analyses drawing out the meanings, perceptions, and understandings that individuals and groups attach to behaviours, experiences, and social phenomena. Qualitative research is adaptable to a broad range of methods and data sources. It is a subjective approach whereby the researcher aims to understand and interpret experiences by viewing the world through the eyes of the individuals being studied. Methods include the various forms of observation, focus groups, and unstructured interviews.

FROM METHOD TO PRACTICE

To understand what a research methodology is, we must recognise that all research and all researchers are embedded in their cultural milieus and steeped in particular standpoints. Does the cultural relativity of our own ways of knowing, the acknowledgment of the influence of our value system, and our understandings of the nature of reality leave us, as social researchers, in a quandary about the worth of our research? Not really. We just need to understand and acknowledge that our research process, our research findings, and the theories we develop are not core truths, but that they are shaped and influenced by our particular values and understandings.

From this perspective, all research is a cultural product. As you will have gathered from the preceding sections, the combination of standpoint, conceptual framework, theoretical paradigm, and method are unique to the individual researcher. But this does

not mean that methodologies are a random combination, or that there are as many methodologies as there are researchers. Rather, there tend to be similarities across key underpinnings that shape our methodologies, as well as the need for scholarly rigour, the need to open our research process and practice, and the need for incorporating research ethics (see Chapter 4). This means that we can usually categorise individual frames of research reference into umbrella types of methodologies, such a feminist or Indigenous.

THE QUALITATIVE–QUANTITATIVE DEBATE

At the centre of this point is what is commonly known as the **quantitative–qualitative debate**. In this somewhat vexed and pointless argument, sides are taken as to whether quantitative methods (that is, methods that produce data relating to social phenomena that are amenable to statistical analysis) or qualitative methods (methods that concentrate on drawing on the detail and social meaning of social phenomena) are superior. The origins of the debate are buried in the time when the dominant use of quantitative, statistically based social science was challenged by emerging qualitative methodologies and approaches. With the place of qualitative research within the social sciences firmly established, this debate is now past its use-by date. Qualitative and quantitative research methods are now regarded as forming different, but equally vital, aspects of the social science research endeavour. Each methodological approach is just an element of the same whole: research. This debate also demonstrates the previously described misunderstanding between method and methodology. Many research designs now combine quantitative methods, which provide reliable results that can be generalised to the wider population under study, with qualitative methods to produce results that are rich in meaning and understanding of social processes (**triangulation**).

Quantitative– qualitative debate: Debate in which sides are taken by researchers as to whether quantitative methods (that is, methods that produce data relating to social phenomena that are amenable to statistical analysis) or qualitative methods (that is, methods that concentrate on drawing on the detail and social meaning of social phenomena) are superior.

EXERCISE 1.2: FOOD IN PRISON

In 2006, Di Heckenberg and Danielle Cody undertook a study of food in prison. The research was triggered by a siege at the prison the year before, in which a central demand was the delivery of fifteen pizzas and there were strong protests over new processes and practices around prison food. The research question was: What is the place and meaning of food in the prison experience of inmates? To answer this question, the researchers conducted semistructured interviews with six former inmates. The interviews revealed concerns about the following areas:

- the closure of mess rooms
- being expected to eat in cells
- reheating food that had been prepared earlier
- the move to plastic utensils and foil containers rather than plates and cutlery
- the replacement of hot weekday lunches with sandwiches.
  Respondents also tended to reflect positively of the 'old days'. One former inmate said:

  Years ago, I used to look forward to our food. What I mean, it was, it wasn't anything spectacular; but there was plenty of it. Back then, you could always get extras and that, like, they used to bring down whatever was left from the kitchen, they would bring it down on plates ... Just say you had a steak for tea, whatever steak was left in the kitchen they would just bring it ... divide it around the yards ... That was back then.

Triangulation: Triangulation describes the combining of different research methods. The value of this practice is that the researcher can gain the advantages of each method used while also reducing the limitations of a single method.

YOUR TASK

1   What explanations (theories) can you think of that might explain why the changes around food have been so unpopular with prisoners?
2   Based on your social understanding of the meanings we make of food, theorise why food might be such a significant topic for inmates that they would riot over changes.
3   How might we interpret the data around the unpopularity of the closure of the mess rooms and prisoners having to eat their meals in their cells?
4   Why do you think prison authorities made the described changes to the food regime in this prison?

CONCLUSION

The key message of this first chapter is that social research is a very broad undertaking. Good social science research is based on a sound understanding of the scientific method, the specific complexities of studying the social realm, and the key interrelationship between data and theory. From this base, there is an endless number of social questions to be asked and social phenomena to be studied, and many different methods and frameworks for conducting the social research questions we pursue. To be an effective and enthralled social researcher, you need a core familiarity and understanding of a wide range of these methods. The specific research method you select for your social research project is dependent on the topic of your study, the methodological framework from which you are approaching your topic, the specific research question that you ask, and the practical and resource constraints.

MAIN POINTS

- Social research is about investigating the social questions we have about our social world.
- The humanness of social research means that social research is often a more complicated endeavour than other scientific research.
- Social science research is distinguished from social commentary or opinion by its use of scientific method.
- The primary aim of social research is to identify, to investigate, and to try to understand social patterns and social meanings.
- The social context of social phenomena is an essential element of social science research.
- Social scientists deal in social aggregates, individual exceptions do not challenge social findings or explanatory theories.
- The two core elements of social science research are empirical data and social theory.
- Social science research is informed and influenced by our worldviews and perspectives. In social science terms, these can be classified as our standpoint, our epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies.
- Methodologies are made up of these, as well as our method and theoretical framework.

FURTHER READING

There are many social research books available, varying in quality, depth, level of coverage, and accessibility. Your library should contain a wide variety of such texts. For more detail on the process of research, the following Australian text is useful.

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