

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

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

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

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.

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.

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?

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

Context: The settings in which texts are situated.

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 Quandamooopa 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.

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 in-depth 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**.

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.

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?

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.



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 as 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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