# 1

# The Nature of Social Science Research

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### Asking social questions, seeking social answers

The enormous social and political changes of the last 40 years, globally as well as in Australia, have fundamentally changed the experience of being a young adult. Most young people now stay in the education system and reside with their parents for far longer than previous generations. One factor linked to this change is that most employment options available to young people increasingly tend to part-time, casual, low-skill, low pay, insecure jobs. How does this changing landscape impact on young Australian people's sense of self and feelings about the future? To investigate this topic, Jenny Chesters and colleagues used quantitative data from Australian longitudinal cohort studies that drew on a set of 710 respondents aged 22–23. The result on their main research question—'Does sense of personal control vary according to employment status?'—indicated that young adults with a relatively strong sense of personal control were more likely than their counterparts to be in secure employment, to be in a long-term relationship and to have higher levels of education. The researchers also found that even after controlling for education, study status, marital status, physical health and mental health, the association between employment status and sense of personal control remained. These findings, they conclude, support concerns about the negative impact of precarious work on other aspects of young peoples' lives and that precarious work experiences may have implications for 'the mental health of a generation' (Chesters et al. 2018).

# What is social research?

**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.

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 and cultural 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 the *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (AIFS 2002) has been conducted by the Department of Social Services since the early 2000s. With the sample now in adolescence recent analysis has shown despite this life point being a difficult time for many young people only about one in eight reported high levels of risky behaviours among their peer friendship group (Gray, Romaniuk & Daraganova 2018). Similarly, the *Footprints in Time: Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (Department of Social Services 2004), which has been collecting data from more than 1500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families from 2008, is demonstrating how Indigenous children in Australia can grow up strong in culture, education and health. For example, Trudgett et al. (2017) found that when parents felt that their child's teacher understood the needs of Indigenous families, there was increased likelihood of a child liking school, feeling comfortable with their teacher and getting more help with their homework from their parent. What both these studies demonstrate is the importance of the components of good social research: an important social question, a socially and culturally relevant methodology, a well thought-out and theoretically informed research plan, the use of appropriate research methods rigorously applied, valid analysis and interpretation, and the 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 and cultural experience and our understandings of the world that 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 and interpersonal observational 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 themselves? 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, in-depth 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 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.

**In-depth interview:** An interview guided by general themes rather than pre-set questions. It is also less formal than a structured interview, and explores 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.

## 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, as participants and as researchers, are not always

**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.

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 would produce very different results to a similar study carried out in current times. Now, for example, we would not begin with the assumption that the career aspirations of married women would differ from those of not-married women.

## 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.

## The 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 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—in other words, the 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: Is inequality in Australia increasing or decreasing?

Social research into inequality in Australia provides a classic example of how differing world views can impact the approach to research and, consequently, the results. What many assume would be a relatively simple mathematical computation relating to levels of wealth, income or poverty levels becomes mired in arguments about how these concepts should be defined, what are valid measurements of wealth, income or poverty, and in what framework these concepts and measures are deployed. As outlined below, the preferred models of different groups tend to reflect differing ideological stances as much as they reflect inequality.

Researchers from the conservative Institute of Public Affairs, Wild and Bushnell (2017), argue that income inequality is declining. Australia, they state, has 'the third most equal distribution of net wealth in the developed world', with all income quintiles experiencing solid growth to their incomes over the past two decades. Data using the Gini co-efficient, which they propose as the most appropriate and reliable measure of income inequality, 'suggests that income is more evenly distributed today than it was 15 years ago' (Wild & Bushnell 2017: 3, 5).

Researchers from the Australian Council of Social Service and the University of New South Wales come to differing conclusions using some of the same measures. Their report, *Inequality in Australia 2018* (ACOSS & UNSW 2018), argues that while Gini co-efficient data indicate that Australia is not as unequal as other English speaking countries, inequality is still higher than the OECD average. The researchers chart a rise in inequality from 1981 onwards, peaking during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2007–08 and argue that while current inequality as measured by the Gini co-efficient is now at similar levels as in 2007–08, it is still higher than in any year between 1981 and 2008. The researchers also point to differing rates of increasing wealth. They cite figures showing that in 2003–16, the average wealth of the richest 20 per cent of the population rose by 53 per cent. Comparatively, the average wealth of those in the middle wealth group rose by 32 per cent and for the poorest 20 per cent of the population, their wealth declined by 9 per cent.

**Gini co-efficient:**
A commonly used indicator of the level of equality in a nation as measured by income distribution. The co-efficient ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing perfect equality and 1 representing perfect inequality.

# The 'science' in social science

**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.

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 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 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. 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 rigour, validity and importance of 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. 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).

'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 or, 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 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.

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

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

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 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.

**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.

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.

## Exercise 1.1: Exploring bullying in schools

Consider the following hypothetical research scenario.

You have been asked to be a research assistant in a project that is investigating the topic of bullying in high schools. The target age group was adolescents, aged 13–16 years. Although still in the development phase, the initial aims of the project are:

- to develop an understanding of the extent of bullying behaviour among high school students
- to explore the social meanings that individuals ascribe to bullying behaviour

These data will be used to generate a picture of the level and extent of bullying among high school students in this age group and how bullying is understood within this group. The purpose is to provide an evidence base to support the development of anti-bullying strategies by the state Education Department. The Department has provided a list of all students from three high schools: one is an inner city school, another is in a outer suburban location and yet another is in a country town. The research will use both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, the researchers will conduct a series of in-depth interviews with 20 students from each school to gather a nuanced picture of how they understand the social phenomenon of bullying and their own experiences of it. These students are selected by their schools as appropriate respondents. The analysis of these data will be used to develop a survey on student's experiences of bullying as a way of testing the major findings of the qualitative phase with a probability sample of students and to catalogue the extent of bullying. The survey will be undertaken face-to-face with students at each school in a room that has been set aside for the purpose.

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

## Task

This research project, while seemingly relatively straightforward, is riddled with potential for bias and ethical problems—all of which must be solved before the research can proceed. Answer the following questions in groups.

1. Which aspects of bullying do you want to investigate—and from whose perspective? While it might be clear that you need to understand bullying from those who have experienced it, what about the perspectives of those who are perpetrators? Additionally, how important is it to understanding attitudes to bullying among those students who are neither victims nor perpetrators?
2. How would you define bullying? Make a list of five behaviours that you would regard as constituting bullying and see if your group agree with your list. Compare your list with that of others. Is theirs similar? See if you can come up with a definition of bullying that could be used in this study.
3. Have you ever experienced bullying, or have you bullied others? How would your own experience of bullying (or lack of it) influence how you approach this topic?
4. What are the ethical concerns that might limit or constrain the way you conduct the research? How might you address these?
5. What factors around ambiguity and social awareness would you need to keep in mind when designing the study?
6. How might external events affect your study? What if there was strong media coverage of a young person who had committed suicide blamed on bullying at the same time as you were conducting interviews? Would this impact results? How?

**Ambiguity:** Vagueness or impreciseness of 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, and most are just shorthand for broader ideas. The meanings of commonly used social science terms and concepts are highlighted and defined throughout each chapter, and combined in the book's glossary. Learning their basic meanings is the key to social research literacy.

# Method and methodology: Understanding the difference

The previous sections emphasised the scientific 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 is that how it really is? Delving into objectivity in research raises thorny questions. For example, 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 as shown in the example around inequality?

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 just 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.

**Methodology:** The worldview through which the research is designed and conducted. It is comprised of our socio-cultural position, our theoretical and conceptual frame, and our method.

# 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 understood and translated into the research approach we take. In practice, this worldview is framed in terms of the social phenomenon under investigation; however, in reality it has more to do with the researcher's own worldview rather than the topic. Within the research process, the elements that make up a methodology are often inextricably entwined, but it is helpful to clarify each separately. My version of these are laid out in Figure 1.1.

**Research question:**
A question that states 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.

Figure 1.1  Conceptualisation of a methodology
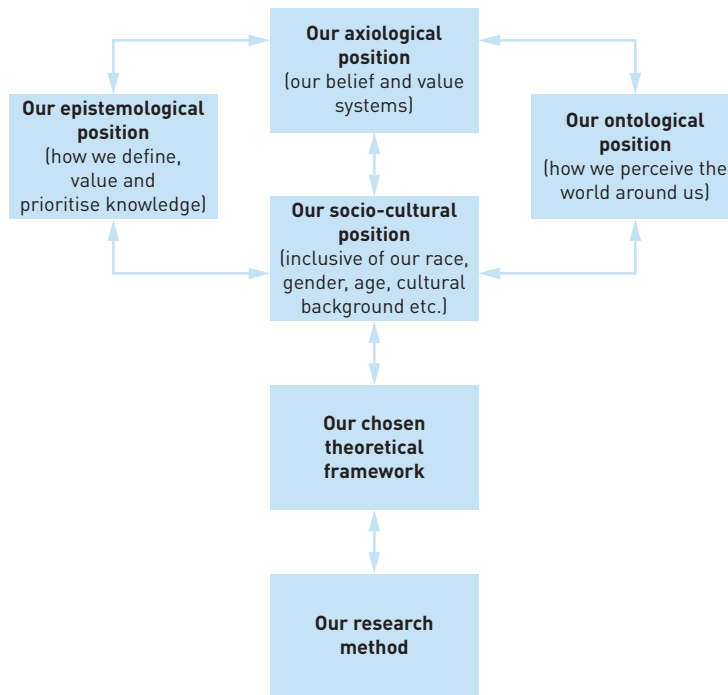


*Source: Adapted from Walter and Andersen (2013)*

# Our socio-cultural position

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

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 social/cultural location. Our socio-cultural position, therefore, is the defining aspect of our methodology. As shown in Figure 1.1, it is the culmination of our epistemological, axiological and ontological positions (see below for clarification of these terms). It also shapes and influences those components. This means understanding the researcher's socio-cultural position is highly relevant to understanding the way they will likely approach the research process. Within this, our gender, social, cultural, economic and racial identity form a central aspect. 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, and the theoretical paradigms that make 'sense' to us.

Yet mostly the influence of socio-cultural position is largely invisible to us. This is especially the case if our various identities are socially dominant; that is, if we are male, middle class, Euro-Australian and 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'. In turn, this will shape how we understand and value knowledge (our epistemological position), what belief and value systems we hold in relation to the topic (our axiological position) and how we perceive the world to be (our ontological position). 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.

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

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 socio-cultural position 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 socio-cultural 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 socio-cultural position. Our socio-cultural positioning—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.

# 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 University 2006). Geography is also important. Sociologist Raewyn Connell (2007) demonstrates through Southern Theory that the presumed universalism of social theories produced in Europe and North America is not only illusory, but that such presumptions marginalise theoretical work from societies away from the global north.

In another 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 are 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. In Marx's theorising, however, women were neither knowers nor sources of knowledge.

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 University 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,

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

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

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.

**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?

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 can be defined as theories related to the nature of being. Therefore, our ontological framework refers to our understanding of what constitutes reality and 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, 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 (2008) 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. Cultural factors also impact and it is important to remember that all of us are shaped by our cultural understandings, not just those who are not part of the dominant culture. Take for example the life-course. For most Western researchers an individual's life-course is perceived as moving in a line from

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

birth through childhood, adolescence and so on. Yet as Martin (2005) points out, the Aboriginal life-course is perceived as circular, not linear. Passing through childhood is not just about a physical growing up, but is a process of engagement with the world in ever-increasing circles of relatedness. As childhood progresses, the child is introduced not just to people but also to country, waterways, skies, climates, animals, plants and spirits. The core message is that all social science researchers, whether from the dominant or non-dominant 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 40 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 questionable. 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.

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.

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

## 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, their analysis, and their 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

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

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 14).

## 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:** Research that studies peoples and cultures using an ethnographic method.

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

## Indigenous paradigm

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

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, which emphasises the relocation of the power in the research relationship from the researcher to the researched. This means that this social research method is frequently employed by researchers approaching their work from an Indigenous paradigm. Chapter 16, on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based research, provides more details on research processes developed within an Indigenous theoretical paradigm.

**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.

## 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 are 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?

**Hypothesis:** A prescriptive form of research question that states 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 in-depth 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.

It is also important to remember that methods are inventions, not fixed entities. Different methods have been developed by different social researchers at different times, mostly because existing methods did not meet the methodologically influenced ambitions of the research. The list of methods used in this book—and others—will also never be complete. New methods will be developed for new research aims and others will fall into disuse because of changing technology or attitudes. Methods are tools and their shape varies by purpose.

## From method to practice

To understand what a research methodology is, we must recognise that all research and all researchers are embedded in their social and cultural milieus and steeped in particular ways of understanding the world. Does the 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. Rather, they are shaped and influenced by our particular values and understandings.

From this perspective, all research is a socio-cultural product. As you will have gathered from the preceding sections, the combination of socio-cultural position, 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 'feminist' or 'Indigenous'.

## **Voices in the field:** Karen Martin

Karen Martin is an academic based at the University of Queensland. 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 live 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.

## 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 usefully within any methodological frame. 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. 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. Qualitative research is adaptable to a broad range data sources and fits within all methodological frames. Key qualitative methods include the various forms of observation, focus groups, and unstructured interviews.

## 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.

**Triangulation:** 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.

## Exercise 1.2: Lack of respect and trust in aged-care facilities

The conditions in Australian aged-care facilities has become an area of increasing social and political concern. Scandals, such as the poor care and elder abuse uncovered at Oakden in South Australia (ABC News Online 2018), are now suspected to be part of a systemic problem rather than being an aberrant case. The concern is such that a federal Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety commenced in early 2019.

So why does such abuse and mistreatment continue to happen, even in the presence of checks and regulations to prevent them? Are there underlying facilitating socio-cultural conditions? Sociologist Susan Banks (2018) sought to understand such conditions in her study exploring the experiences of paid care-work, what care means for those involved and what forces shape care encounters. Her qualitative focus (using in-depth interviewing, ethnographic observation and photo-voice data from two client–worker pairs) looked at how meanings of care and identity intersect for carers and

Oxford University Press Sample Chapter

those being cared for in disability and aged facilities. Her findings suggested both 'workers' and 'clients' self-images are compromised by external signals of mistrust and devaluing. These include low wages and status for workers, policy discourses that position such work as low-value welfare/charity and demeaning treatment from organisations.

## Your task

1. What are your social understanding of the meanings of 'care-work'? Who do you see when you envisage a careworker? Gender? Age? Ethic background? Class background?
2. Do the same for your social understandings of (a) an aged-care facility and (b) aged-care patients.
3. What explanations (theories) can you think of that might explain why the status position of aged-care workers, across these social dimensions described, might impact negatively on the care aged-care patients receive?
4. How do you think aged-care organisations might contribute to mistrust between workers and those they care for? Is the status position of workers shared by organisational administrators? Explain (theorise) your answer to this question.
5. Imagine you were putting in a submission to the Royal Commission. Think of one area of research within the aged-care system that you think could provide an evidence base for improving conditions of aged-care recipients.

## 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 socio-cultural position which frame and is framed through our epistemological axiological, and ontological position.
- 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.

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