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The Goals of Social Research

Introduction

Social life is infinitely complex. Every situation, every story, is unique. Yet people make their way through this world of complexity. Most situations seem familiar enough, and people can usually figure out how to avoid the unfamiliar. Also, there is order in complexity, even if people are not always conscious of the order. Some of this order-in-complexity is easy to describe (as in what sports fans do to mark certain events in a game). (For example, hockey fans will toss hats out onto the ice when a player scores a "hat trick"—three goals in a single game.) Other examples of order-in-complexity are difficult to explain, much less describe (such as the interplay of pagan and Christian symbols in the development of some religious rituals).

Social researchers seek to identify order and regularity in the complexity of social life; they try to make sense of it. This is a fundamental goal. When they tell about society—how people do or refuse to do things together—they describe whatever order they have found. There is even a describable order to what may appear to be social chaos, such as a mass political demonstration that gets out of hand and leads to a violent attack on nearby symbols of authority. Another fundamental goal exists for many social scientists: to generate knowledge with the potential to transform society. These social scientists conduct research with the hopes that their findings will lead directly to social change. They hope their work will have a broader impact on society—by affecting public policy or influencing the direction of social change. Leading sociologists, particularly Michael Burawoy (2005), have pushed in the last 10 years for more public sociology—that is, sociological research
that is conducted and written specifically to reach people outside of academia, including policymakers, the media, and marginalized social groups. Along with being directed at a broader audience, public sociology defines, promotes, and informs public debate about topics ranging from social inequalities to state-sanctioned torture. Thus, there is an explicit activist element, though not specifically conservative or liberal in political bent. While the merits of public sociology have been debated recently, this tradition extends back to the work of Jane Addams, Harriet Martineau, and other feminist researchers. In addition, the research of W. E. B. Du Bois, centering on racism in the 20th century, is clearly in line with what is now being called public sociology.

While the above two fundamental goals (understanding the complexity of social life and generating knowledge with the potential to transform society) are present within a broad range of research projects, there are many other more specific goals that contribute to these larger ones. They are quite diverse. For example, the goal of testing theories about social life contributes to the larger goal of identifying order in complexity; so does the goal of collecting in-depth information on the diverse social groups that make up society. The goal of giving voice to a marginalized group contributes to the larger goal of generating transformative knowledge; so does the goal of making predictions about which policy alternatives will result in the desired outcomes. One factor that contributes to the diversity of the goals of social research is the simple fact that social research reflects society, and society itself is diverse, multifaceted, and composed of many antagonistic groups. It follows that the goals of social research are multiple and sometimes contradictory. Today, no single goal dominates social research.

Several of the main goals of social research resemble those of research in the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. These goals include, for example, the identification of general patterns and relationships. When we show that people with more education tend to vote more often and that this link exists in many democratic countries, we have documented a general relationship for individuals living in democracies. Similarly, when we observe that countries with greater income inequality tend to be more politically unstable, we have identified a pattern that holds across entire nation-states. Knowledge of general patterns and relationships is valuable because it is a good starting point for understanding many specific situations and for making predictions about the future. Also, general patterns in society are directly relevant to the testing of social science theory—the body of ideas that social scientists often draw upon in their efforts to make sense of and tell about society.
Some of the other goals of social research, however, are not modeled on the natural sciences. These other goals follow more directly from the fact that social researchers are members of the social worlds they study (see Chapter 1). For example, some social researchers try to "give voice" to their research subjects—providing their subjects the opportunity to have their stories told, their worlds represented. If not for the interest or concern of social researchers, these groups might have little opportunity to relate their lives, in their own words, to the literate public. For example, the experiences of recent immigrants struggling for survival in the noise and confusion of our largest and most congested cities are rarely represented in the media. The goal of giving voice clearly does not follow from the model of the natural sciences. A physicist is not concerned about giving voice to the lives and subjective experiences of specific particles. The goal of giving voice may come into direct conflict with the goal mentioned above of identifying general patterns because it is difficult to both privilege certain cases by giving them voice and at the same time chart general patterns across many cases. When the goal is to identify general patterns, no specific case, no specific voice, should dominate.

Altogether, seven main goals of social research are examined in this chapter (see "Main Goals" box). Generally, the first three goals follow the lead of the natural sciences. The fourth and sixth goals, by contrast, follow from the social nature of social science—the fact that social researchers study phenomena that are relevant in some special way to the social world of the researcher. The fifth and seventh goals straddle these two domains. In some ways, they link up with natural science models; in other ways, they reflect the socially grounded nature of social research.

### Main Goals of Social Research

1. Identifying general patterns and relationships
2. Testing and refining theories
3. Making predictions
4. Interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena
5. Exploring diversity
6. Giving voice
7. Advancing new theories
The list of goals discussed in this chapter is not exhaustive; several others could be added. For example, evaluation research, which is a type of social research, seeks to measure the success of specific programs or policies, especially in education and the delivery of social services. Did the clients of an agency benefit when its record-keeping procedures were simplified and streamlined? Or did the resulting sacrifice of detailed information following the effort to streamline harm specific categories of clients? Which ones? While evaluation research usually has very specific goals tied to particular programs, such research is also relevant to general patterns, one of the key concerns of social research. Thus, most social research involves at least one and usually several of the seven goals discussed in this chapter.

Because social research has multiple and competing goals, a variety of different research strategies has evolved to accommodate those goals. A research strategy is best understood as the pairing of a primary research objective and a specific research method. The last part of this chapter introduces three common research strategies, among the many different strategies that social researchers use. The three research strategies discussed in this chapter and examined in detail in Part II of this book are

1. Qualitative research on the commonalities that exist across a relatively small number of cases
2. Comparative research on the diversity that exists across a moderate number of cases
3. Quantitative research on the correspondence between two or more attributes across a large number of cases

Seven Main Goals

1. Identifying General Patterns and Relationships

Recall that one of the key characteristics of social scientific representations discussed in Chapter 1 was the focus on social phenomena that are socially significant in some way. Phenomena may be significant because they are common, or general; they affect many people, either directly or indirectly. This quality of generality makes knowledge of such phenomena valuable. For example, suppose it can be shown that in countries where more public funds are spent on the prevention of illness (for example, by improving nutrition, restricting the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, providing children free
immunization, and so on), health care costs less in the long run. Knowledge of this general pattern is valuable because it concerns almost everyone.

One of the main goals of social research is to identify general patterns and relationships. In some quarters, this objective is considered the primary goal because social research that is directed toward this end resembles research in the natural sciences. For some people, this resemblance gives social research more legitimacy, making it seem more like social physics and less like social philosophy or political ideology.

For most of its history, social research has tried to follow the lead of the natural sciences in the development of its basic research strategies and practices. These approaches to research are especially well suited for examining general patterns, and knowledge of general patterns is a highly valued form of knowledge. For example, if we know the general causes of ethnic antagonism (such as the concentration of members of an ethnic minority in lower social classes), we can work to remove these conditions from our society or at least counteract their impact and perhaps purge ourselves of serious ethnic antagonism. As more and more is learned about general patterns, the general stock of social scientific knowledge increases, and it becomes possible for social scientists to systematize knowledge and make connections that might otherwise not be made. For example, general knowledge about the causes of ethnic antagonism within societies might help to further understanding of nationalism and the international conflicts spawned by nationalistic sentiments.

Knowledge of general patterns is often preferred to knowledge of specific situations because every situation is unique in some way. Understanding a single situation thoroughly might be pointless if this understanding does not offer generalizable knowledge—if it doesn’t lead to some insight relevant to other situations. From this perspective, knowing one situation thoroughly might even be considered counterproductive because we could be deceived into thinking an atypical situation offers useful general knowledge when it does not, especially if we are ignorant of how this situation is atypical.

Because of the general underdeveloped state of social scientific knowledge, we are not always sure which situations are typical and which are not. Furthermore, because every situation is unique in some way, it also could be argued that every situation is atypical and therefore untrustworthy as a guide to general knowledge. In short, when the goal is knowledge of general patterns, social researchers tend to distrust what can be learned from one or a small number of cases.

According to this reasoning, knowledge of general patterns is best achieved through examination of many comparable situations or cases, the
more the better. The examination of many cases provides a way to neutralize each case's uniqueness in the attempt to grasp as many as possible. If a broad pattern holds across many cases, then it may reflect the operation of an underlying cause, which can be inferred from the broad pattern. (On issues of plausible inference, see Polya 1968.)

For example, while it may be possible to identify both "kind and benevolent" dictators and democratic governments that terrorize their own citizens, the broad pattern across many countries is that the more democratic governments tend to brutalize their own citizens less. This correspondence between undemocratic rule and brutality, in turn, may reflect the operation of an underlying cause—the effect that the concentration of power has on the incidence of brutality. While not directly observed, this cause might be inferred from the observed correspondence between undemocratic rule and brutality. It is obvious that both brutality and benevolence exist in all countries. Still, across many cases the pattern is clear, and exceptions should not blind us to the existence of patterns.

2. Testing and Refining Theories

General patterns matter not only because they affect many people but also because they are especially relevant to social theory. As described in Chapter 1, social theories come out of a huge, ongoing conversation among social scientists and other social thinkers. This conversation is an ever-changing pool of ideas, a resource to draw on and to replenish with fresh thinking.

It is also important to note that there is a virtually limitless potential for new ideas to emerge from within this pool because existing ideas can be combined with each other to produce new ones, and new implications can be drawn from these new combinations. Also, social theory is forever borrowing ideas from other pools of thinking, including philosophy, psychology, biology, and even physics, chemistry, and astronomy. The cross-fertilization of ideas is never ending.

For example, ideas about the relationship between workers and owners in industrial countries, especially the idea that workers are exploited, have been applied to the relations between countries. Some analyses of work emphasize the degree to which profits are based on keeping the wages of workers low, especially those with the fewest skills. From this perspective, there is natural conflict between the owners of firms and the workers: If wages are kept low, then profits will be higher; if wages are too high, profits will suffer.
This thinking has been transferred to the international arena by some theorists who assert that rich countries benefit from the poverty of poor countries (see, for example, Baran 1957; Frank 1967, 1969; Wallerstein 1974, 1979). Some theorists argue that "labor-intensive" production, which uses simpler technologies and tends to offer only very low wages, has been shifted to poor countries, while the rich countries have retained capital-intensive production, which uses advanced technology. Workers in rich countries benefit from the greater availability of high-wage jobs and from the cheap prices of the labor-intensive goods imported from low-wage countries. In this way, all the residents of rich countries—owners, managers, and workers—exploit the cheap labor of poor countries. Furthermore, 10 to 30% of the highly educated workforce in developing countries leave to reside permanently in developed countries—these outflows are commonly referred to as "brain drain" (Lowell 2001).

This argument, which is an example of the cross-fertilization of ideas, can be tested with economic data on countries. In this way, a new perspective—and a new source for testable hypotheses—is derived from existing ideas.

One of the primary goals of social research is to improve and expand the pool of ideas known as social theory by testing their implications, as in the example just presented, and to refine their power to explain. Typically, this testing is done according to the general plan of the scientific method, as described in Chapter 1. Hypotheses are derived from theories and their implications and then tested with data that bear directly on the hypothesis. Often the data are collected specifically for testing a particular hypothesis, but sometimes already existing data can be used (e.g., census and other official statistics published by government agencies).

By testing hypotheses, it is possible to improve the overall quality of the pool of ideas. Ideas that fail to receive support gradually lose their appeal, while those that are supported more consistently gain greater stature in the pool. While a single unsuccessful hypothesis rarely kills a theory, over time, unsupported ideas fade from current thinking. It is important to identify the most fertile and powerful ways of thinking and to assess different ideas, comparing them as explanations of general patterns and features of social life. Testing theories can also serve to refine them. By working through the implications of a theory and then testing this refinement, it is possible to progressively improve and elaborate a set of ideas.

It is possible to conduct social research without paying much direct attention to this pool of ideas. There are many aspects of social life and many different social worlds that attract the attention of social researchers, independent of the relevance of these phenomena to social theory. After all, social researchers, like most social beings, are curious about social life. However,
improving the quality of social theory is an important goal because this pool of ideas structures much thinking and much telling about society, by social scientists and others.

3. Making Predictions

While social researchers use theories to derive “predictions” (hypotheses) about what they expect to find in a set of data (for example, a survey), they also use accumulated social scientific knowledge to make predictions about the future and other novel situations. It is this second meaning of the word prediction that is intended when we say that “making predictions” is one of the main goals of social research.

Consider an example of this second kind of prediction: Research indicates that ethnic conflict tends to increase when the supply of economic rewards and resources (jobs and promotions, for instance) decreases. Thus, a social scientist would predict increased ethnic tensions in an ethnically diverse country that has just experienced a serious economic downturn. Prediction is often considered the highest goal of science: We accumulate knowledge so that we can anticipate things to come. We make predictions based on what we know. Two kinds of knowledge help us make predictions: knowledge of history (past successes and failures) and knowledge of general patterns.

Knowledge of history helps us to avoid repeating mistakes. Understanding of the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, for example, has motivated our economic and political elites to attempt to moderate the violent swings of market-oriented economic life. The 1929 crash provides clear lessons about the need that arises for a balance between the free play of markets (for example, stock markets) and regulations imposed through hierarchies (for example, the Securities Exchange Commission). The prediction here is that unregulated markets will fluctuate widely and may even self-destruct.

The second kind of knowledge, understanding of general patterns, is useful for making projections about likely future events. For example, we know that certain types of crime (drug dealing, for instance) increase when legitimate economic opportunities decrease. We can use this knowledge, combined with assumptions about other causal factors, to extrapolate future crime rates given different employment conditions. If current trends toward higher production levels with fewer workers continue, it would seem reasonable to anticipate increases in certain types of crimes. Projections of this type are quite common and sometimes can be surprisingly accurate. It is much easier to predict a rate (the rate of homelessness, the rate of drug-related crimes, the rate of teenage pregnancy, and so on) than it is to predict
what any single individual might do. For example, it is relatively easy to formulate a reasonable estimate of the number of people who will be murdered in Los Angeles next year, but it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to predict very much about which ones, among the millions, will be the perpetrators or the victims.

While making predictions is one of the most important goals of social research, it’s not always the case that prediction and understanding go hand-in-hand. Sometimes our predictions are quite accurate, but our understanding of the actual underlying processes that produce outcomes is incomplete or simply erroneous. For example, the causes of drug addiction are quite complex, as is the process of becoming an addict. However, it is a relatively simple matter to forecast levels of drug addiction in major U.S. cities based on knowledge of the social conditions that tend to favor high levels of addiction.

Here is a simpler example: It might be possible to predict with fair precision how many murders will be committed next year based on the number of automobiles stolen this year. However, that doesn’t mean that some fixed percentage of the people who steal cars one year graduate to homicide the next. More than likely, the two rates respond to the same causal conditions (such as unemployment or the formation of street gangs), but at different speeds.

Predicting rates is much easier than predicting specific events. The kinds of things many social scientists would like to be able to predict—namely, the occurrence of specific events at specific points in time in the future—are simply beyond the scope of any science. For example, many social scientists chastised themselves for being unable to predict the fall of communism in the countries of Eastern Europe in 1989. Their failure to predict these dramatic events made them feel inadequate. However, no science, social or otherwise, could possibly achieve this kind of prediction—the timing of specific future social or natural events. The key to understanding this is the simple fact that it is very difficult to predict specific future events.

Consider the natural science of meteorology. At best, this science can predict the probability of rain over the next several days. But what if we want to know when it will start, when it will stop, and how much it will rain? It should be possible to predict these things. After all, no human intervention, interpretation, or subjectivity is involved, only measurable, physical qualities such as temperature, wind direction and velocity, moisture, and so on. But the natural science of meteorology cannot offer this precision; it simply cannot predict specific events. Likewise, meteorology cannot predict which day or even which year a hurricane will again sweep across Louisiana. Even when there is a hurricane in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, it’s very difficult to tell which, if any, coastal area it will demolish.
In a similar manner, no social scientists could predict, say in 1980, that communism would fall in Eastern Europe in 1989. For many years, some social scientists claimed that communism was likely to fall in the near future. Even in 1980, a few would have been willing to attach specific probabilities to specific years, say a 40% chance of falling by the year 2000. In addition, social scientists have debated for many decades, and continue to debate, the possibility of Korean reunification and its economic and social consequences. Some argue that the process of reunification has already begun, but at a snail’s pace—South Korea recognizes that its economy would not be able to handle a rapid reunification process such as that seen in Germany. Another example is the Communist Party of China that currently dominates the Chinese government. Will it retain its hold on power with the growth of capitalist markets? If not, how and when will a shake-up of this magnitude occur? Social science cannot provide a definitive answer. Social science is not inadequate but appears so because of the specificity of the predictions we desire.

Will a new religious movement, emphasizing conservative values, the sanctity of marriage and the family, self-reliance, and the rejection of white culture and its materialism sweep inner-city neighborhoods next year? Sometime in the next 10 years? Will wild spasms of nihilistic self-destruction sweep through teenage populations in the predominantly white suburbs of major U.S. cities in the year 2022? It would certainly be impressive to be able to predict events such as these, but it is outside the scope of any science to offer this degree of specificity. At best, social researchers can make broad projections of possibilities using their knowledge of general patterns.

4. Interpreting Culturally or Historically Significant Phenomena

Knowledge of general patterns is not the only kind of valuable knowledge, however, especially when it comes to understanding social life. In the social sciences, knowledge of specific situations and events, even if they are atypical (and usually because they are atypical; see Dumont 1970), is also highly valued. The significance of most historical phenomena derives from their atypicality—the fact that they are dramatically nonroutine—and from their impact on who we are today.

For example, many social researchers address important historical events such as the Fall of the Roman Empire or the U.S. Civil War. We care about these events and their interpretation because of their relevance for understanding our current situation—how we got to where we are. We are fascinated by the U.S. Civil War not because we expect it to be repeated, but
because of its powerful impact on current race relations and the structure of power (who dominates whom and how they do it) in the United States today.

Other phenomena are studied not because of their historical relevance to current society but because of their cultural relevance. The bits and pieces of African cultures that slaves brought with them, for example, have had a powerful impact on the course and development of American culture. Other phenomena may be culturally significant because of what they may portend. The heavy metal rock culture of the late 20th century, for example, could signal future directions of American culture.

Often there is competition among social researchers to establish the "accepted" interpretation of significant historical or cultural phenomena. For example, social researchers have examined the events that led to the fall of the communist regimes (that is, of the power cliques that controlled the centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe). These events have been addressed because they are historically and culturally relevant and significant, and different researchers have different ideas about how and why these regimes fell. The interpretation of these events that prevails, especially the interpretation of the fall of the communist regime in the former Soviet Union, has important implications for how social scientists, policymakers, and the public think about "communism" and the possibility of centralized control of national economies. It is not always the case that a single interpretation prevails, not even in the very long run. The struggle to have an interpretation accepted as "correct" can extend over generations of scholarship and stretch over centuries of debate.

Social researchers who study general phenomena usually do not address specific events or their interpretation. They would rather know about a general pattern (for example, the covariation across countries between the extent to which democratic procedures are practiced, on the one hand, and the level of political repression, on the other) than about a specific set of events (for example, the detention of U.S. citizens deemed "enemy combatants" by the U.S. government following al-Qaeda's coordinated attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001). It is difficult, however, to address many of the things that interest social researchers and their audiences with research focusing only on that which is general.

For instance, social researchers sometimes address the subjectivity or consciousness of their subjects. There are many possible interpretations for any set of events: Did the Nazis intend to exterminate the Jews all along, or did they adopt this policy in response to the conditions of World War II? Was it necessary for Stalin to terrorize Soviet citizens in order to forge state socialism? Was he insecure and paranoid, or was terrorism simply an effective way of maintaining his personal power? In both episodes of massive inhumanity, it is
not enough to know that millions of people died or how they died. We want to know *why*. However, the study of general patterns typically does not shed light on issues related to the consciousness of their research subjects.

5. Exploring Diversity

Another main goal of social research is to explore and comprehend the social diversity that surrounds us. While this goal may seem similar to the goal of identifying general patterns, and does complement it in some respects, it is quite different. For example, one general pattern is that educational and economic development tend to go together; countries with better schools and higher literacy rates tend to be richer. However, the fact that a general pattern exists doesn’t mean that there aren’t important and interesting exceptions. Some poor countries have well-developed educational systems and very high literacy rates—for example, Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of over 90% (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2010). Meanwhile, some rich countries have poorly developed schools and surprisingly low levels of literacy—for example, Saudi Arabia with a literacy rate of 85% (UNESCO 2010).

Exploring diversity often means that the researcher ignores dominant patterns and focuses on the variety of circumstances that exist. How is living in a poor country with a high level of literacy different from living in other poor countries? What happens when a low level of educational development or literacy is combined with wealth? In short, the study of diversity avoids an exclusive focus on what is most common.

More generally, exploring diversity furthers an understanding and appreciation of **sociodiversity**, a concept that parallels the ecological notion of biodiversity. We protect biological species close to extinction because we are concerned about biodiversity. The human species dominates all others, so much so that many species are threatened with extinction. Many environmentalists see declining biodiversity as an indicator of the degree to which human societies have threatened the self-regulating natural order of the biosphere we call Earth.

People tend to be less concerned about sociodiversity. Anthropologists have documented dramatic declines in sociodiversity. They have studied societies in all corners of the world over much of the last century. As the reach of global economic and political forces has expanded, these forces have more deeply penetrated many parts of the world. Small-scale societies that were once more or less external to the international system have been incorporated into it. One direct consequence of this incorporation is the disappearance of many cultural forms and practices and the transmutation of countless others.
Sociodiversity at the level of whole societies has declined dramatically. More and more, there is a single, dominant global culture.

A simple example of this change is the decline in arranged marriages and the increasing importance of romantic involvement in determining one's spouse in many cultures. For example, the percentage of arranged marriages in Japan fell from 63% to 7% between 1955 and 1998 (Retherford, Ogawa, and Matsukura 2001). From the perspective of the contemporary United States, this shift seems natural and inevitable, and arranged marriages seem quaint. But in fact, arranged marriages have been an important source of social order and stability in many societies, joining different families together in ways that undercut social conflict.

It is important to understand societies that differ from our own because they show alternative ways of addressing common social issues and questions. For example, societies cope with scarcity in different ways. In some societies, great feasts involving entire communities are a routine part of social life. These feasts not only provide protection against starvation, especially during lean years, but they also increase the strength of the social bonds joining members of communities. There has also been remarkable diversity among human societies in how basic arrangements such as the family, kinship, the gender division of labor, and sexuality have been structured or accomplished.

Of course, great social diversity exists today, despite the impact of that giant steamroller, the world capitalist economy, on sociodiversity worldwide. There are many social worlds (and social worlds within social worlds—see Chapter 1) in all parts of all countries. There is great diversity even in the most advanced countries—those most closely joined by the world economy. Often, much diversity is simply unacknowledged or ignored. Sometimes assumptions are made about sameness (for example, that people living in inner-city tenements think or act in certain ways) that turn out to be false when the diversity within a social category is examined closely. Also, people often respond to sameness and uniformity by crafting new ways of differentiating themselves from others. Sometimes these efforts lead only to new fads; other times they culminate in entirely new social formations (as when a religious cult withdraws from mainstream society).

At times social researchers start out not knowing if studying a new case or situation will offer useful knowledge of diversity. They study it in order to make this assessment. For example, some immigrant groups are very successful economically. It is important to find out how and why they achieve economic success in order to determine if this knowledge is relevant to other groups (or, more generally, to U.S. immigration policy). It may be that their success is due to circumstances that cannot be duplicated elsewhere, but
there is no way to know this without studying the specific causes of their success. Here is another example: Catholic nuns tend to live longer and healthier lives than most other groups, religious or secular. We may not have to live like nuns to match their longevity, but we won’t know this unless we study them and find out why they live longer, healthier lives (see Snowdon 2001). Whether or not the study of diverse groups offers knowledge that is useful, research on diverse groups contributes to social scientists’ understanding of social life in general.

**Giving Voice**

Sometimes the goal of exploring diversity is taken one step further, and the researcher studies a group not simply to learn more about it but also to contribute to its having an expressed voice in society. In research of this type, the objective is twofold: to increase the stock of knowledge about different types, forms, and processes of social life, and to tell the story of a specific group, usually in a way that enhances its visibility in society.

Very often the groups studied in this way are marginal groups, outside the social mainstream (for example, the homeless, the poor, minority groups, immigrant groups, people labeled mentally ill, and so on). This approach to social research asserts that every group in society has a “story to tell.” Some groups (for example, professionals, middle-class white families, and so on) are presented in the mainstream beliefs and values of society as the way life is and should be. Many social researchers believe it is their responsibility to identify excluded groups and tell their stories. By giving them voice, researchers often are able to show that groups considered deviant or different in some way do not deviate as much as most people think. For example, a common finding is that even people in the most dire and difficult circumstances strive for dignity.

While social researchers who do this kind of research often focus on marginal or deviant groups, this emphasis is neither necessary nor universal. Mary Blair-Loy (2003), for example, studied highly privileged women who were devoted to either their high-powered careers or their family life. She documented the balance between the level of commitment to work life expected of executives (work devotion schema) and the level of commitment to home life expected of mothers (family devotion schema). In both schemas, the expected level of commitment is so high that other obligations are to be considered secondary, never equal.

In research of this type, social theories may help the researcher identify groups without voice and may help explain why these groups lack voice, but theory is not considered a source of hypotheses to be tested. When the goal
of a project is to give voice to research subjects, it is important for the researcher to try to see the world through their eyes, to understand their social world as they do. Thus, researchers may have to relinquish or “unlearn” a lot of what they know in order to construct valid representations of their research subjects—representations that embody their subjects’ voice.

To achieve this level of in-depth understanding, researchers must gain access to the everyday world of the group. It might be necessary, for example, to live with the members of a marginalized group for extended periods of time and gradually win their confidence (see, for example, Pattillo 2008). When the researcher feels he or she knows enough to tell their stories, one goal of the telling might be to try to minimize, as much as possible, the voice of the researcher. *Minimizing the voice of the researcher* is viewed as an ethical imperative by some social researchers. The privileging of a researcher’s voice over the research subjects’ voices is seen as another source of marginalization for the individuals or groups being researched (see Chapter 4 for additional discussion).

Some researchers, for example, use photographs of the social group of interest. The researchers may even hand the camera over directly to the subject (a method known as auto-photography or self-directed photography, and pioneered by social psychologist Robert Ziller [1990]). The degree to which the research subjects’ voices are filtered in the process of constructing the final representation varies greatly among researchers. In-depth interviews may be conducted, the subjects may be asked to interpret what they see in the photo images, or may be asked to actually write the captions for the pictures (for photography examples, see Harper 2001; Heath and Cleaver 2004; for a video example, see Holliday 2004). A variety of systematic techniques have been developed by social researchers to facilitate this type of in-depth knowledge and understanding (see Banks 2001; Emmison and Smith 2000; Knowles and Sweetman 2004).

Some social researchers consider research that seeks to give voice as activist or advocacy research and therefore doubt its objectivity. How can research that seeks to enhance the visibility of a marginal group be conducted in a neutral way? Isn’t it inevitable that researchers will favor the positive aspects of marginal groups in their representations of these groups? In reality, most social researchers are committed to objectivity and neutrality in much the same way that most journalists are. However, some common cautions are as follows:

- Don’t whitewash.
- Present the good and the bad.
- Be wary of how people rationalize what they do.
- Maintain skepticism.
- Examine the same events from several points of view.

Giving voice does not necessarily entail advocacy. Still, social researchers who seek to give voice must be vigilant in their efforts to represent their groups appropriately. Most social worlds, marginal or mainstream, are quite complex, and advocacy typically oversimplifies. Generally, it is not difficult to spot a one-sided representation or to recognize research that merely advocates for a group.

Those who argue that giving voice is not a valid research objective should acknowledge that almost all research gives voice in the sense that it enhances the visibility of the thing studied and represents the viewpoint of some group or groups, even implicitly. Even a study of the general social conditions that favor stable democracy across many countries enhances the importance and visibility of stable democracy as a desirable condition simply by studying it. Research that seeks to give voice is clear in its objectives.

7. Advancing New Theories

Many different kinds of social research advance social theory, even research that seeks to interpret historical or cultural significance. The testing of theories (goal 2) also advances theory in the limited sense that these tests indicate which theoretical ideas have more support as explanations of social life. The goal of advancing theory as it is used here, however, involves more than assessing and refining existing ideas. When theory is advanced, ideas are elaborated in some new way. To advance theory, it is not necessary to come up with a complete model of society or even some part of it. The development of new ideas and new concepts is the most that research seeking to advance theory usually accomplishes.

Theory testing is primarily deductive. Hypotheses about social life are derived from theories and then tested with relevant data. The researcher then draws the implications of the results of these tests for theory (see Chapter 1). Research that advances theory, by contrast, is usually described as having an inductive quality. On the basis of new evidence, the researcher develops a new theoretical concept or new relationship, or advances understanding of existing ones.

Not only does the researcher use data to illustrate the new concept, but he or she may also elucidate the relation of the new concept to existing concepts. Two researchers, for example, developed the concept of "interactional vandalism" to describe the violations of conversational norms that male
street vendors, scavengers, or panhandlers commit when they “cat-call” women walking by their locations (Duneier and Molotch 1999). When developing a new concept, it is necessary to distinguish it from related concepts and to explain its logical and causal connections to others. The concept of the “sticky floor” was developed because of the great deal of attention given to the idea that women employees hit a glass ceiling. Catherine Berheide (1992) did not see women “maxing out” when she looked at low-wage government employees; rather, she saw very little job mobility of any kind.

Many theoretical advances come from detailed, in-depth examination of cases. Exploring diversity, for example, may lead to the discovery of new social arrangements and practices. The study of behavior of the groupies who surround certain kinds of rock bands, for example, might lead to new insights about the importance of rituals in contemporary social life. The mere existence of novel phenomena also may challenge conventional thinking. Existing theories may argue that certain ways of doing things or certain behaviors are incompatible, that it has to be either one or the other. The discovery that “incompatible” elements can coexist calls such theories into question and may force researchers to theorize about how such logically incompatible things can exist simultaneously.

Research that gives voice also may lead to theoretical advances because such research often leaves existing theories behind in its attempt to see social worlds through the eyes of their members. This openness to the viewpoints of low-status and low-visibility people may expose the inadequacies of existing theoretical perspectives. Finally, work that seeks to interpret cultural or historical significance may also advance theory because it, too, is based on detailed analyses of cases. For example, in-depth research on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 could lead to new insights on the importance of the interplay of religious ideology and political organization in the large-scale political changes occurring internationally.

Research that seeks to identify general patterns across many cases is usually associated with the goal of testing theory (via hypotheses), and less often with the goal of advancing theory, even though, as already noted, testing theory does refine it. However, the analysis of broad patterns can lead to theoretical advances (see, for example, Esping-Andersen 1990; Evans 1992; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Tilley 1984; Walby 2008). Sometimes hypotheses fail or are only partially supported, and researchers generally want to know why. They may study additional patterns in their data to find out why the theory they are testing does not fit the data well.

For example, using a generally accepted theory as a starting point, a researcher might test the hypothesis that richer countries tend to have a more
equal distribution of income (that is, within their own borders) than poorer countries. Analysis of relevant data might show that while this pattern holds for most countries, among the richest 15 or so it does not—they might all have roughly the same degree of equality. This finding might lead the researcher to speculate about the newly discovered pattern: Why is it that greater wealth does not lead to greater equality once a certain level of economic development is reached? A variety of factors might be examined in the effort to account for this pattern. This search might lead to the identification of causal factors that suggest fundamental revision of the theory used to generate the initial hypothesis about patterns of income inequality.

While the deduction-versus-induction distinction is a simple and appealing way to differentiate types of social research, most research includes elements of both (see Stinchcombe 1968). For this reason, we argue that all research involves *reduction*—a term developed by philosophers of science to describe the interplay of induction and deduction (Hanson 1958). It is impossible to do research without some initial ideas, even if the goal is to give voice to research subjects. Thus, almost all research has at least an element of deduction. Similarly, almost all research can be used to advance theory in some way. After all, social theories are vague and imprecise. Every test of a theory refines it, whether or not the test is supportive. Social research involves *reduction* because there is typically a dialogue of ideas and evidence. The interaction of ideas and evidence culminates in theoretically based descriptions of social life (that is, social scientific representations) and in evidence-based elaborations of social theory.

**The Link Between Goals and Strategies**

It is clear that no researcher can tackle all seven goals at once, at least not in the same study. A classic view of science says that it is a violation of the scientific method to try to advance theory (goal 7) and test theory (goal 2) in the same study. Data used to generate a new theory should not also be used to test it. Most of the tensions between goals, however, revolve around practical issues.

It is difficult, for example, to examine many cases so that a general pattern can be identified (goal 1) and also study one case in depth so that its specific character can be understood (goal 6). Even when it is possible to do both, they don’t always mix well. What if the findings from the in-depth study of one or a small number of cases contradict the results of the analysis of broad patterns across many cases? Which finding should the social
researcher trust? However, both kinds of research are important because both help social researchers find order in complexity, order that they can represent in their reports. The first type of research helps social researchers identify what is general across many cases—to discern the underlying order that exists amid great variation; the other helps them comprehend the complexity of specific situations directly.

Many different strategies of social research have emerged to accommodate its multiple and competing goals. As already noted, a research strategy is best understood as a pairing of a general research objective and a specific research method. Each strategy constitutes a way of linking ideas and evidence to produce a representation of some aspect of social life. Research strategies structure how social researchers collect data and make sense of what they collect. Even though some strategies are clearly more popular than others, there is no single "correct" way of conducting social research.

While there are many different strategies of social research, three very broad approaches are emphasized here:

- The use of qualitative methods to study commonalities
- The use of comparative methods to study diversity
- The use of quantitative methods to study relationships among variables

These three strategies are discussed in detail in Part II of this book because they represent three common but different ways of carrying on a dialogue between ideas and evidence. The selection of these three strategies does not imply that other strategies are not important or do not exist. Indeed, there are plenty of qualitative researchers who study diversity, and there are many researchers who use comparative methods to study commonalities. The pairings emphasized here (qualitative methods with commonalities, comparative methods with diversity, and quantitative methods with relationships among variables) have been selected because they offer the best illustration of the core features of different methods. They also provide a strong testament to the unity and diversity of social research.

Qualitative researchers interested in commonalities examine many aspects or features of a relatively small number of cases in depth. A study of how women without partners decide to become mothers is an example of a qualitative study (Hertz 2006).

Comparative researchers interested in diversity study a moderate number of cases in a comprehensive manner, though not in as much detail as in most qualitative research. A study of the effects of decentralization on the redistribution of political power of regional and local governments in Latin America is an example of a comparative study (Falleti 2005).
Quantitative researchers interested in how variables covary across cases typically examine a relatively small number of features (that is, variables) across many, many cases. A study of the rate of invalid or missing ballot votes cast by different racial groups is an example of a quantitative study (Herron and Sekhon 2003).

These three strategies can be plotted in two dimensions showing the relation between the number of cases studied and the number of aspects of cases studied (see Figure 2.1). The figure illustrates the trade-off between studying cases and studying aspects of cases, or variables. Because the energies and capacities of researchers are limited, they often must choose between focusing on cases as wholes (qualitative research on commonalities), focusing on variables (quantitative research on relationships among variables), or balancing the two in some way (comparative research on diversity). It is possible to gain a detailed, in-depth knowledge of a small number of cases, to learn a moderate amount about an intermediate number of cases, or to focus on limited information from a large number of cases.

*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables.
The trade-off between number of cases and number of features does not concern how much information social researchers can collect. After all, social researchers can collect very detailed information on each of thousands and thousands of cases. The Bureau of Labor Statistics collects detailed information on millions of compa


tation is studied (for example, is each case examined individually and the relevance of the information to a particular research question?)

Imagine trying to grasp the nature of informal, interpersonal networks in each of the top 500 U.S. corporations. It might take years to unravel the informal networks of a single corporation. A social researcher can gain this kind of intimate knowledge about only a relatively small number of cases.

However, it might be possible to survey these same 500 corporations and find out basic information such as total assets, profitability, number of employees, and even the degree to which the board members of these corporations have intertwined social and professional networks. The information from this survey would not add up to intimate knowledge of each of the 500 corporations, but it could be used to examine relations among variables characterizing them. For example, does large corporate size pose an obstacle to profitability? Does the social network of board members shape CEO compensation? Answering these questions does not require in-depth knowledge of the workings of any of the 500 corporations. Of course, such in-depth knowledge would improve the analysis of the evidence on size and profitability or networks and compensation, as well as the representation of the results, but it is not essential to the study of the general relationship among these sets of variables.

It is important to note that Figure 2.1 represents the tendencies of these three strategies and does not establish absolute boundaries around the strategies in any way. Some quantitative researchers, for example, collect hundreds of variables on thousands of cases when they conduct research, and they try to squeeze as much of this information as possible into the representations they construct. Of course, these representations are still “big picture” representations of broad patterns of covariation across cases. Likewise, there are some qualitative researchers who work in teams to increase the number of cases they study. Thus, Figure 2.1 should be viewed as an attempt to depict the nature of the typical representations that result from these three common strategies.

Table 2.1 maps the relation between these three strategies and the seven goals of social research discussed in this chapter. The column headings of the...
Table 2.1: The Goals and Strategies of Social Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Comparative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identifying broad patterns</td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Testing/refining theory</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Making predictions</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Interpreting significance</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Exploring diversity</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Giving voice</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Advancing new theories</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>secondary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The three research strategies are qualitative research on commonalities, comparative research on diversity, and quantitative research on relationships between variables. *Primary* indicates that the strategy is a very common way of achieving a goal; *secondary* indicates that the strategy is sometimes used to achieve a goal.

table are the three general strategies; the rows are the seven goals. The table shows the fit between goals and strategies, focusing on the three strategies emphasized here.

The three different strategies range from intensive (qualitative study of commonalities) to comprehensive (comparative study of diversity) to extensive (quantitative study of the relationships among variables) in their approach to cases. An intensive approach is best suited for goals that involve close attention to specific cases; a comprehensive approach is best suited for goals that involve examination of patterns of similarities and differences across a moderate number of cases; and an extensive approach is best suited for goals that involve knowledge of broad patterns across many cases. It is important to remember, however, that the strategies examined here and in Part II are three among many different strategies of social research.

The goal of identifying general patterns (Goal 1), for example, is best served by the quantitative approach, but it is also served by the comparative approach, though maybe not quite as well. (Thus, the primary strategy for identifying general patterns is the quantitative approach; a secondary strategy is the comparative approach.) A pattern is not general if it does not embrace many cases. Also, most statements about general patterns involve
variables. Both of these features of general patterns point to the quantitative approach as the primary strategy. The goal of testing theory (goal 2) is also served by quantitative and comparative strategies. Most theories, however, are composed of abstract concepts that are linked to each other and thus concern general relationships that can be viewed across many cases or across a range of cases. Sometimes a single case will offer a critical test of a theory, but this use of individual cases is relatively rare (Eckstein 1992). Moreover, from the perspective of most theories, single cases are unique and therefore relatively unreliable as raw material for testing theories. Likewise, the most appropriate strategy for making predictions is the quantitative approach. Most predictions involve extrapolations based on many cases—the more the better, as long as they are appropriate and relevant to the substance of the prediction.

The goals of interpreting significance and giving voice, by contrast, are best served by strategies that examine a small number of cases (often a single historical episode or a single group) in depth—the qualitative approach. Similarly, the best raw material for advancing theory is often provided by strategies that focus on cases, which is the special forte of qualitative research and one of the strong points of comparative research. However, all research, including quantitative research, can advance theory. Finally, the goal of exploring diversity is best served by the comparative approach. However, because qualitative and quantitative research contributes to knowledge of diverse groups, they, too, serve this goal.

The Social Nature of Social Research

Imagine a chart comparable to Table 2.1 constructed for a natural science such as chemistry or physics. Goals 4 and 6 would not exist—at least, they would not be considered main goals—and Goal 5 would concern only a handful of researchers. The remaining four goals (1, 2, 3, and 7) are all well served by the quantitative approach—a strategy that addresses general relations between measurable aspects of the things social scientists study. Goals 4, 5, and 6 reflect the social nature of social research. It is also these goals that sometimes make social scientists seem “unscientific,” especially to scientists, social or otherwise, strongly committed to the other goals.

Consider again the goal of giving voice. Why should any particular voice be privileged by social research? Why should a social researcher try to enhance a particular group’s visibility in society? Who cares whether people who are not marginal can understand those who are? Consider the goal of interpreting cultural or historical significance. How do we know that the
social researcher is not trying to whitewash horrific events, or perhaps make
the members of a truly destructive group look like victims of oppression?
Finally, consider the goal of exploring diversity. By highlighting diversity, a
social researcher may glorify it. Or it may be that too much focus on differ-
ences in society is detrimental. Might it be better to emphasize the things that
we have in common, what most members of society share?
These aspects of social research make it an easy target of criticism.
However, it is important to understand that no social research exists in a
vacuum. Research on general patterns, for example, may simply privilege
what is normative. All social research gives voice in one way or another to
some aspect of society. Similarly, research that tests theories has implications
for how we think about human nature, social organization, and the differ-
ent kinds of social worlds that are possible to construct. In fact, because of
its social nature, all social research has implications for the interpretation
and understanding of anything that people do or refuse to do together.
Social research is inescapably social in its implications. For this reason, social
researchers cannot escape bias, regardless of which goals motivate research.