

FIGURE 6.3 *Death as a social construction*

But, once we adopt one or another model, it starts to have a big influence upon how our research proceeds. For instance, as we have seen, if 'dead on arrival' can be a label applied in different ways to different people, we might develop a hypothesis about how the label 'dead on arrival' is applied to different hospital patients.

Because of our model, we would then probably try to collect research data that arose in such 'naturally occurring' (or non-research-generated) contexts as actual hospitals, using methods like observation and/or audio or video recording. Note, however, that this would not rule out the collection of quantitative data (say from hospital records). Rather, it would mean that our main body of data would probably be qualitative. Following earlier research (e.g. Jeffery, 1979; Dingwall and Murray, 1983), our findings might show how age and presumed moral status are relevant to such medical decision-making as well as social class. In turn, as shown in Figure 6.3, these findings would help us to refine our initial hypothesis.

GENERALIZATIONS AND THEORY BUILDING

Theorizing about data does not stop with the refinement of hypotheses. In this section, I will show how we can develop generalizations out of successfully tested hypotheses and, thereby, contribute to *building* theories.

First, we need to recognize that case studies, limited to a particular set of interactions, still allow one to examine how particular sayings and doings are embedded in particular patterns of social organization.

A classic case of an anthropologist using a case study to make broader generalizations is found in Mary Douglas's (1975) work on a Central African tribe, the Lele. Douglas noticed that an anteater, that Western zoologists call a 'pangolin', was very important to the Lele's ritual life. For the Lele, the pangolin was both a cult animal and an anomaly. It was perceived to have both animal and human characteristics: for instance, it tended only to have one offspring at a time, unlike most other animals. It also did not readily fit into the Lele's classification of land and water creatures, spending some of its time on land and some time in the water. Curiously, among animals that were hunted, the pangolin seemed to the Lele to be unique in not trying to escape but almost offering itself up to its hunter.

Fortunately, Douglas resisted what might be called a 'tourist' response, moving beyond curiosity to systematic analysis. She noted that many groups who perceive anomalous entities in their environment reject them out of hand. To take an anomalous entity seriously might cast doubt on the 'natural' status of your group's system of classification.

The classic example of the rejection of anomaly is found in the Old Testament. Douglas points out that the reason why the pig is unclean, according to the Old Testament, is that it is anomalous. It has a cloven hoof which, following the Old Testament, makes it clean; but it does not chew the cud, which makes it dirty. So it turns out that the pig is particularly unclean precisely because it is anomalous. Similarly, the Old Testament teachings on inter-marriage work in relation to anomaly. Although you are not expected to marry somebody of another tribe, to marry the offspring of a marriage between a member of your tribe and an outsider is even more frowned upon. In both examples, anomaly is shunned.

However, the Lele are an exception: they celebrate the anomalous pangolin. What this suggests to Douglas is that there may be no *universal* propensity to frown upon anomaly. If there is variability from community to community, then this must say something about their social organization.

Sure enough, there is something special about the Lele's social life. Their experience of relations with other tribes has been very successful. They exchange goods with them and have little experience of war.

What is involved in relating well with other tribes? It means successfully crossing a frontier or boundary. But what do anomalous entities do? They cut across boundaries. Here is the answer to the puzzle about why the Lele are different.

Douglas is suggesting that the Lele's response to anomaly derives from

experiences grounded in their social organization. They perceive the pangolin favourably because it cuts across boundaries just as they themselves do. Conversely, the Ancient Israelites regard anomalies unfavourably because their own experience of crossing boundaries was profoundly unfavourable. Indeed, the Old Testament reads as a series of disastrous exchanges between the Israelites and other tribes.

By means of this historical comparison, Douglas has moved from a single-case explanation to a far more general theory of the relation between social exchange and response to anomaly. Glaser and Strauss (1968) have described this movement towards greater generality as a move from *substantive* to *formal* theory. In their own research on hospital wards caring for terminally ill patients, they show how, by using the comparative method, we can develop accounts of people's own awareness of their impending death (i.e. a substantive theory) and move to accounts of a whole range of 'awareness contexts' (formal theory).

Douglas's account of the relation between responses to anomaly and experiences of boundary crossing can also be applied elsewhere. Perhaps bad experiences of exchanges with other groups explains why some Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims are so concerned to mark their own identity on the 'holy places' in Jerusalem and reject (as a hateful anomaly) multiple use of the same holy sites.

In any event, Douglas's study of the Lele exemplifies the need to locate how individual elements are embedded in forms of social organization. In her case, this is done in an explicitly Durkheimian manner which sees behaviour as the expression of a 'society' which works as a 'hidden hand' constraining and forming human action. Alternatively, using a constructionist framework, one can look at the fine detail of people's activities without treating social organization as a purely external force (e.g. Moerman, 1974). In the latter case, people cease to be 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967) and skilfully reproduce the moral order.

HOW TO THEORIZE ABOUT DATA

Unlike Moerman or Douglas, most readers will not bring to their research any very well-defined set of theoretical ideas. If you are in this position, your problem will be how you can use data to think in theoretical terms. The following list is intended merely as a set of suggestions. Although it cannot be exhaustive, it should serve as an initial guide to theorizing about data. It can also be read in conjunction with my discussion of the three kinds of research sensitivity in Chapter 5.

In carrying out your research, it is suggested that you think about the following five issues:

- 1 *Chronology* Can you gather data over time in order to look at processes of change? If not, it is worth searching out historical evidence which may at least suggest how your research problem came into being.

- 2 *Context* How are your data contextualized in particular organizational settings, social processes or sets of experiences? For instance, as Moerman shows, answering an interviewer's question may be different from engaging in the activity which is the topic of the interview. Therefore, think about how there may be many versions of your phenomenon.
- 3 *Comparison* Like Mary Douglas, who generated her theory by comparing how different groups treated anomalies, always try to compare your data with other relevant data. Even if you cannot find a comparative case, try to find ways of dividing your data into different sets and compare them. Remember that the comparative method is the basic scientific method.
- 4 *Implications* When you are reporting your research, think about how what you have discovered may relate to broader issues than your original research topic. In this way, a very narrow topic (e.g. how the Lele perceive the pangolin) may be related to much broader social processes (e.g. how societies respond to anomalous entities).
- 5 *Lateral thinking* Be like the Lele. Don't erect strong boundaries between concepts but explore the relations between apparently diverse models, theories and methodologies. Celebrate anomaly!

CONCLUSION

The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970) has described some social sciences as lacking a single, agreed set of concepts. In Kuhn's terms, this makes social research 'pre-paradigmatic' or at least in a state of competing paradigms. As I have already implied, the problem is that this has generated a whole series of social science courses which pose different social science approaches in terms of either/or questions.

Such courses are much appreciated by some students. They learn about the paradigmatic oppositions in question, choose A rather than B, and report back, parrot fashion, all the advantages of A and the drawbacks of B. It is hardly surprising that such courses produce very little evidence that such students have ever thought about anything; even their choice of A is likely to be based on their teacher's implicit or explicit preferences. This may, in part, explain why so many undergraduate social science courses actually provide a learned incapacity to go out and do research.

Learning about rival 'armed camps' in no way allows you to confront research data. In the field, material is much more messy than the different camps would suggest. Perhaps there is something to be learned from both sides, or, more constructively, perhaps we start to ask interesting questions when we reject the polarities that such a course markets?

Even when we decide to use qualitative and/or quantitative methods, we involve ourselves in theoretical as well as methodological decisions. These decisions relate not only to how we conceptualize the world but also to our theory of how our research subjects think about things.

But theory only becomes worthwhile when it is used to explain something.

Howard Becker (1998: 1) reports that the great founder of the Chicago School, Everett Hughes, responded grumpily when students asked what he thought about theory. 'Theory of what?', he would reply. For Hughes, as for me, theory without some observation to work upon is like a tractor without a field.

Theory, then, should be neither a status symbol nor an optional extra in a research study. Without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation.

SUMMARY

Research questions are inevitably theoretically informed. So we *do* need social theories to help us to address even quite basic issues in social research. But theories need to be distinguished from models and concepts:

- *Models* provide an overall framework for how we look at reality.
- *Concepts* are clearly specified ideas deriving from a particular model.
- *Theories* arrange sets of concepts to define and explain some phenomenon.
- *Hypotheses* are testable propositions.
- *Methodologies* define how one will go about studying any phenomenon.
- *Methods* are specific research techniques.

You can improve your ability to theorize about data by thinking about:

- 1 *Chronology* Gathering data over time in order to look at processes of change.
- 2 *Context* Considering how your data are contextualized in particular organizational settings, social processes or sets of experiences.
- 3 *Comparison* Trying to find ways of dividing your data into different sets and comparing each.
- 4 *Implications* Thinking about how what you have discovered may relate to broader issues than your original research topic.
- 5 *Lateral thinking* Exploring the relations between apparently diverse models, theories and methodologies.

Further reading

Becker's book *Tricks of the Trade* (University of Chicago Press, 1998) contains two chapters which are highly relevant to learning how to theorize about your data (Chapter 2 on 'Imagery' and Chapter 4 on 'Concepts'). Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein's book *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (Oxford University Press, 1997) is an invaluable, thought-provoking guide to the vocabularies, investigatory styles and ways of writing of different theoretical 'idioms'.

Exercise 6.1

Howard Becker reports that his colleague Bernard Beck responded to students seeking to theorize about their data by instructing them: 'Tell me what you've found out, but without using any of the identifying characteristics of the actual case' (1998: 126).

Becker gives the example of his own research on Chicago teachers which seemed to show that these teachers sought to improve their situation by moving to different schools rather than trying to get promoted in their present school. Using his data, but forbidden to talk about 'teachers' or 'schools', how might Becker have generated an account of his research that would have satisfied Beck?