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es C. Ragin (Ph.D., University of North Carolina) is Professor of gy and Political Science at Northwestern University and Research at the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. Best known for k in comparative methadology, his book *The Comparative Method: g Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* won the 1989 Stein Prize of the International Social Science Council of UNESCO.

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SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY



CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL RESEARCH

CHARLES C. RAGIN



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It's also true that the evidence itself may seem too constraining. Both journalists and social researchers have trouble with pesky evidence—data that don't give the exact message the investigator would like to present. The social "truths" that can be manufactured through novels, plays, and other forms of fiction may be much more appealing. Finally, some people want their cases to "speak for themselves" as much as possible. They may prefer to present exact recordings like videotapes and let their audiences choose their own messages in these representations.

While social research is difficult and limiting, it also offers special rewards for those willing to make the investments. People who like to read and write about social issues are drawn to social research. Often they have strong political commitments (for example, to fairness in the economic and political arenas). They hope to translate their concerns into publications—representations of social life—that influence social policy. Publications can influence policy directly by bringing issues to the attention of public officials or indirectly by altering the social consciousness of the informed public. Like the three researchers mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, thousands of other social researchers have constructed representations of social life reflecting their concerns. Many have had a direct or indirect impact on social issues.

The beauty of social research is that it tempers and clarifies the concerns and interests of those who practice the craft. Social research has this impact on people who address social issues in several ways: Social researchers must engage in long-standing debates about society and social life when they conduct research. Social researchers must base their representations on systematic examination of large quantities of systematically collected evidence. Social researchers as a community pass judgment on the representations of social life produced by social researchers (Merton 1973; Kuhn 1962). In effect, they inspect and evaluate each other's work.

Thus, of all ways of representing social life, those that emanate from social research have a very strong grounding in ideas and evidence and a great potential for influencing social policy. As a community of scholars, social researchers work together to construct representations of social life that fulfill the many and varied goals of social research, from documenting broad patterns and testing social theories to giving voice to marginal groups in society.

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 things, 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). Other examples of order-in-complexity are difficult to explain, much less describe (for example, the interplay of pagan and Christian symbols in the historical development of an elaborate religious ritual).

Social researchers seek to identify order and regularity in the complexity of social life; they try to make sense of it. This is their most 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.

While identifying order in the complexity of social life is the most fundamental goal of social research, there are many other, more specific goals that contribute to this larger goal. 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. Another 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 the goals of research in the "hard" sciences like 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 hard 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 hard sciences. A physicist is usually not concerned to give voice to the lives and subjective experiences of specific particles. The goal of giving voice may come into direct conflict with the goal 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 major goals of social research are examined in this chapter. They include:

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

Generally, the first three goals follow the lead of the hard 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 hard science models; in other ways they reflect the socially grounded nature of social research.

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 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 have evolved to accommodate different 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 (covariation)

The 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 their 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 major goals of social research is to identify general patterns and relationships. In some corners, this objective is considered the *primary* goal because social research that is directed toward this end resembles research in the hard sciences. 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 hard 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 (one general cause might be 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 national 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, know-

ing 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 cases 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 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, on-going 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 (see Lenin 1975).

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 hypotheses. Often the data are collected specifically for testing a particular hypothesis, but sometimes already existing data can be used (for example, 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 by others.

3. Making Predictions

While social researchers use theories to derive “predictions” (actually, 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 major 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 moderate the violent swings of market-oriented economic life. An unsuccessful military venture into Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s has made our military leaders wary of intervening in guerrilla wars. Social researchers draw lessons from history by relating events to general concepts. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 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 easy to extrapolate or project a good estimate of the number of people who will be murdered in Los Angeles next year, but it is impossible to predict very much about who, 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.

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 both 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 Eastern Europe in 1989. Their failure to predict these dramatic events made them feel impotent. 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 “hard” 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 like temperature, wind direction and velocity, moisture, and so on. But the hard science of meteorology cannot offer this precision; it simply cannot predict specific events. Nor can meteorology predict which day, or even which year, a hurricane will again sweep across Galveston Island, Texas. 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. Social science is not impotent, 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 black inner-city neighborhoods next year? Sometime in the next ten years? Will wild spasms of nihilistic self-destructiveness sweep through teenage populations in the white suburbs of major U.S. cities in the year 2009? 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 like the French Revolution or the civil rights movement. We care about these events and their interpretation (for example, how the Roman Empire fell or the history of slavery) because of the relevance of these events 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 twentieth 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 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 both social scientists and the literate 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 (the detention of Japanese-Americans by the U.S.

government during World War II, for instance). It is difficult, however, to address many of the things that interest social researchers, and their audiences, in research that focuses only on what is general.

For example, 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. Researchers who study general patterns typically do not address issues related to the consciousness of their research subjects.

5. Exploring Diversity

Another major 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), and some rich countries have poorly developed schools and surprisingly low levels of literacy (Saudi Arabia, for instance).

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 or on dominant patterns.

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 are 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 worldwide decline in arranged marriages and the increased importance of romantic involvement (see Barash and Scourby 1970). From the perspective of modern-day U.S. Americans, 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.

The efforts of anthropologists to document rapidly disappearing societies have been preserved in their writings and in data compilations such as the **Human Relations Area File (HRAF)**, which catalogs many different aspects of hundreds of societies and cultures that no longer exist. 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 like 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 unac-

knowledged or ignored. Sometimes assumptions are made about sameness (for example, that people living in inner-city ghettos 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; sometimes, they culminate in entirely new social formations (as when a religious cult withdraws from mainstream society).

Sometimes 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. It is important to find out how and why they are successful 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. Another example: Catholic nuns tend to live longer and healthier lives than most other groups, religious or secular. It may not be the case that we 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 than others. 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.

6. *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 not only to increase the stock of knowledge about different types, forms, and processes of social life, but 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, homosexuals, 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, business people, middle class whites, 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 that it is their responsibility to identify excluded groups

and tell their stories. By giving voice, researchers often are able to show that groups that are 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. Arlene Daniels (1988), for example, studied the wives of rich and *powerful men in a West Coast city and argued that many of them carried on what she called "invisible careers."* In a book bearing that title she documented their tireless charitable activities and showed how these privileged women organize volunteer efforts to improve the quality of life in their communities. Still, their efforts are hidden and taken for granted, and the women themselves portray their labor not as work but as self-sacrifice.

In research that seeks to give voice, 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 their world through their eyes, to understand their social worlds 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, Stack 1974; Harper 1982). 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.

Some researchers, for example, take photographs of the social worlds of a group and then record their subjects' descriptions and interpretations of the photographs. A transcript of their descriptions is then published along with the photographs (see Harper 1987; Suchar and Markin 1990). In fact, a variety of systematic techniques have been developed by social researchers to facilitate this type of in-depth knowledge and understanding (see Denzin 1970, 1978; McCall and Simmons 1969; Strauss 1987)

Some social researchers consider research that seeks to give voice *advocacy* research and therefore doubt its objectivity. (Becker 1967 addresses this issue in depth.) 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? Most social researchers are committed to objectivity and neutrality in much the same way that most journalists are. *Some common cautions are*

- 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. 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 (goal 2) 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, he or she may also elucidate the relation of the new concept to existing concepts. One researcher, for example, developed the concept of *edgework* based on his studies of people who skydive and from related research on people who seek out other dangerous situations (Lyng 1990). When developing a new concept, it is necessary to distinguish it from related concepts and to explain its logical and causal connections to others (see also Wieviorka 1988, 1992).

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 coexist.

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 could lead to new insights on the importance of the interplay of religious ideology and political organization in large-scale political change.

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, Paige 1975; Rokkan 1970, 1975; Tilly 1984; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Sometimes hy-

potheses 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 fifteen 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 national 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 kinds of social research, most research includes elements of both (see Stinchcombe 1968). For this reason some philosophers of science (for example, Hanson 1958) argue that all research involves *retroduction*—the interplay of induction and deduction. 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. Research involves retroduction because there is typically a dialogue of ideas and evidence in social research. The interaction of ideas and evidence culminates in theoretically based descriptions of social life (that is, in 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.