You know from the title that this book is about social research. I will begin by asking some questions to encourage you to start thinking about what social research is. This is the first step to thinking about how research can be designed in order to produce information about the social world that is of the highest possible quality.

Most people reading this book will be students, and if you are a student, you probably live in a world where you take endless tests that measure what you know. My question is different: How do you know what you know? A characteristic of the current world is that we have too much information from too many sources. We know about the world from our practical experiences. We learn about the world as we go through our daily lives, and over time we develop a considerable amount of knowledge from these experiences. We also learn about the world by talking with people we know—family, friends, and coworkers—and we get further information from people we do not know—bloggers, anonymous web page authors, journalists, and talk show hosts. Some people seek information by attending public lectures as well as meetings of religious or social organizations. Students, of course, are in regular contact with textbooks that explicitly teach about the world as well as with teachers whose job it is to teach about the world. I could go on about sources of information, but I probably have made my point: The answer to my question—how do you know what you know?—is that we know through our own experience and through what known and unknown other people tell us. Our environment is saturated with information.

Although we gain much knowledge about the world without explicitly searching it out, my second question is about information that you do actively
seek: Where do you go when you have a question you need answered? Of course, the answer depends on the type of question being asked. Questions in daily life (Should I apply for this job? Why is my best friend angry at me?) are often answered by relying on prior experiences and common sense or by asking trusted friends or respected elders. There are self-help books, websites, and support groups for questions about personal troubles, and all sorts of questions can be answered in websites such as Wikipedia or Ask.com.

Our technological, mediated world has made it easy to find answers to just about any question at any time. This leads to my next question: How do you know what information can be trusted? Our complex era makes assessing the probable truth of information very difficult. Here is a short summary of what I am sure you already know: Anyone can become a blogger, conveying his or her opinions to everyone on everything from how to be a good mother to how to manage foreign policy; any person, group, or organization can set up a website to promote any personal, social, political, religious, or economic agenda. Some online publishers automatically accept any manuscript written by any person on any topic. Indeed, people who wish to be authors do not even need to go through publishing companies, because technology allows self-publishing without any review by anyone. In these and countless other ways, information can come to us unfiltered, without any review, and without even a pretense that it has any relationship to something that can be recognized as truth.

This is not good. In daily life, each of us has countless needs for trustworthy information. Parents need information to help make decisions about sending their children to public or charter schools; patients need information to make decisions about what medical treatments furnish the best hope; consumers need to know how to evaluate the quality of products; citizens need information to decide how to vote on policies that will affect millions, tens of millions, or hundreds of millions of people.

Traditional means of assessing the likely truth value of information—trusting particular categories of people such as elders and church leaders, relying on practical experience, or plain old-fashioned common sense—still can be used as yardsticks to judge the likely credibility of some of what we see and hear. Yet as our world grows larger and more complex, these traditional ways of evaluating knowledge are insufficient. How can we rely on our personal experiences to make decisions about which public policies to support when the policies are targeted to people we do not know, to people we never have met? Does the wisdom of elders extend to knowledge about the benefits and limitations of the most current medical or computer technology? We live in an increasingly complex, global, and technological social order, and many of the questions generated in such places cannot be answered by relying on tradition, the wisdom of elders, personal experience, or common sense.
This takes me to my specific topic of social research, which is one way of generating information about the social world as well as one way of evaluating the quality of information about that world. I begin with the obvious: What is social research?

DEFINING SOCIAL RESEARCH

While social research is only one of many ways to search for answers to questions, it is a very important way. Think about how often you have been asked to accept something because it is “based on research.” It sometimes seems that merely saying that information “is based on research” is asserting its truth value. From validating statements about what kinds of food and exercise lead to good health to supporting advice about how to have a happy marriage to upholding claims about how and what schools should teach, the term research seems to have magical powers in making something true.

What is it about social research that encourages trust? Here is a basic definition of social research, the parts of which combine to give the idea of social research its power:

Social research is the systematic and empirical exploration of human social life.

**Exploration:** The central term in this definition is exploration. Social research is about exploring the mysteries of social life. Social life contains countless mysteries: Why do some people become saints while others become sadists? What are the causes and consequences of poverty? What are relationships between gender and crime or between race and voting behavior? How do people fall in love? Social research of any type is detective work in the truest sense; it is detective work to explore the mysteries of social life.

**Systematic:** As with all detective work, research is not a haphazard search for clues; it is systematic. Just as good detectives proceed cautiously in finding and developing clues, good researchers work in ways that can be described as structured, orderly, methodical, coherent, consistent, and logical.

**Empirical:** The exploration in social research is systematic and it also is empirical, meaning that it is evidence-based. Evidence in research is called data, and data are defined as what we can sense about the social world—what we can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Most data in social research
are from sight and sound: what people say (in talk or in writing), what people do, or records of what people have said and/or done in the past. While I will discuss the many types of data and the multiple techniques that can generate data, all research shares the characteristic that it is based on evidence. Stated simply, it is not research when people (no matter how smart they are) argue that something is true because they say it is true. In research, something is true because we can sense it—we can see it, hear it, touch it, smell it, or feel it.

**Social Life:** The final term in the definition of social research describes the types of mysteries that interest social researchers. These are the mysteries of human social life associated with several academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, history, criminology, political science, psychology, gender studies, social work, public health, and communications. Although there are major differences in the types of questions associated with each of these academic areas, what they all share is a primary interest in people. So while geologists study the physical causes of volcanic eruptions, social researchers are more interested in how these eruptions influence people. While biologists study physical and chemical workings of human reproductive systems, social researchers are interested in questions about the social nature and social consequences of fertility and reproduction.

Social research is a particular way of obtaining information about the social world. It requires actually looking at and listening to what is in this world rather than merely speculating about what might be in it. Research requires careful, rather than haphazard, detective work. Information from social research can be highly valued precisely because these characteristics offer the potential for generating information that is of the highest possible quality.

**Social Research and Other Ways of Knowing**

The definition of social research as the systematic, empirical exploration of human social life distinguishes it from other ways of knowing. Knowledge from social research is not generated by the same methods or evaluated by the same criteria as knowledge from philosophy, religion, or art; knowledge from social research only occasionally confirms what we learn from our own practical experience or what seems to be common sense.
Saying that knowledge from social research is different from knowledge generated by other ways of knowing is not saying that other forms of knowledge are inferior. Different means different. However, for two practical reasons, it is important for you to understand how social research works even if you personally evaluate other ways of knowing as more important. First, understanding how social research works will give you a set of skills that can serve you well in your daily life as you do your own research to make decisions, such as where to live or what kinds of household appliances are most economical. The skills you learn by studying social research will be useful in doing detective work on a wide variety of questions. Second, we are often told what we should do and think based on social research. If you understand how research works, you will be able to ask questions about the research producing the results. You will not need to simply accept findings because someone says they are true nor will you be forced to rely only on your personal biases to decide the probable truth value of what you are told. This knowledge gives you the power to make your own evaluations.

This takes me to the next topic: evaluating research. While relatively few people want or need to design social research, the skills to evaluate research are becoming increasingly important as our information-saturated environment simultaneously produces both more information and fewer oversights on information credibility. For this reason, I think this book is about evaluating research as much as it is about designing research.

EVALUATING SOCIAL RESEARCH

While social research is an excellent method to generate information about the world, not all social research is high quality. One of my primary goals for this book is to help you gain some insight into the characteristics of high-quality research. The general lesson is quite easy:

Rules and standards define the expectations for high-quality social research.

The results of social research deserve to be seriously considered when—and only when—research design, implementation, and data analysis all have been done according to rules and standards. Although there are many variations in how these rules and standards are defined by different subcommunities of researchers, a large part of the systematic nature of social research comes from rules and standards that are enforced by research communities. To
take obvious examples: class projects as well as thesis and dissertation research are evaluated by faculty members who judge the extent to which research meets standards; reports of research submitted to journals for potential publication are evaluated by reviewers and editors and, if published, will be evaluated by the people who read the journal. Although there can be disagreements about the precise content of rules and standards, there is no disagreement that social research is rule bound.

THE STUDY OF SOCIAL RESEARCH DESIGN

It is not uncommon for social science students to approach their research methods courses with dread. The term research often conjures images of scientists as men in white coats who talk in ways that make them seem much smarter than the rest of us. The term research also can be associated with unappealing images of experiments with rats or frogs. For many reasons, some understandable and some simply unfortunate, students can find the actual experience of their research methods courses parallels their negative expectations. Negative experiences are at least partially created by the tendency of introductory methods courses to emphasize learning the vocabularies and technical details of research methods.

To be absolutely clear, facts are important, and communication is not possible unless we all understand and use common vocabularies. So the typical contents of social research methods classes and textbooks are necessary. However, a regrettable consequence of stressing the rule-bound nature of research is that it encourages students to memorize vocabularies and technicalities without understanding what anything actually means, without understanding research methods as ways of knowing about the social world.

This is where I hope to intervene. My interests are in helping you—the person reading this book—to understand the reasons for the rules governing social research, which means learning about the kinds of thinking behind the rules.

I am limiting my focus in two ways. First, I will cover only those topics connected with social research design: the tasks of forming questions, showing why questions are important, conceptualizing and perhaps operationalizing the major study concepts, developing techniques of data generation, choosing a sample, and writing a report of results. I will not talk about how social research design is implemented—how interviews or observations are done or how documents are coded—or how data are analyzed.

My second limitation is that I will emphasize what is often ignored in regular methods textbooks or what can get lost in the blizzard of technical details characterizing those texts. While social research textbooks typically
are about how to do social research, my interest is in how to think about it. I will call this methodological thinking, which is a way of thinking underlying the rules, procedures, and vocabulary associated with research methods. I have learned from my teaching experience that people who first learn about research as a way of thinking find it relatively easy to then learn the specific rules and technicalities, because these follow logically from the basic principles.

So that is my plan: I will leave it to others to tell you the very important technical information about how to do research, and I will focus on encouraging you to think about research in particular ways.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF METHODOLOGICAL THINKING

The remainder of this book will fill in the details and offer many examples of the following basic principles of the kind of thinking I want to promote. Consider these a series of guidelines about how to approach social research design. What I would like you to notice is how these themes are basic and straightforward. As with social research itself, there is nothing mysterious or complicated about these points as long as you think.

Think Critically

A book on research methods should begin and end with the importance of critical thinking; everything between the beginning and the end should be about critical thinking. The elements of social research methods are no more and no less important than the consequences of thinking about how to gather information about human social life in ways that will lead to the highest-quality information possible. The best way to think about critical thinking is that it is thinking about thinking.

Critical thinking is thinking about thinking: It is analyzing and evaluating what you think and why you think it.

Critical thinking means analyzing and evaluating; it means not accepting information simply because you agree with it or like the implications and not rejecting information simply because you disagree with it or dislike the implications. Critical thinking requires thinking about biases—your personal biases as well as those from disciplinary and methodological preferences—and how they influence decisions about how to do and evaluate research. Critical
Thinking as it applies to research also requires understanding that how the general public understands research can be different from how researchers think about it.

Although thinking—questioning, assessing, and appraising—is something humans can do, it is not something we do automatically. Scientists studying cognition have found that human brains simply are not capable of consciously processing all the information coming from all of our senses while simultaneously directing the workings of each and every part of our physical bodies. Brains partially compensate for this physical inability by having “nonthinking” as a default mode for incoming information. Stated in another way, while our brains will automatically do a great many things (such as pull our hands from fire or tell us when we need food), evaluating the possible truth value of abstract information is a higher-order brain function that is not automatic. Thinking takes effort and thinking takes time.

The first requirement in developing the skills of methodological thinking is to learn how to think critically, and this means learning how to move from the automatic mode of not thinking to the more difficult and time-consuming mode of thinking.

**Treat All Knowledge as Tentative**

A hallmark of research is that it is characterized by a critical/skeptical attitude.

A critical/skeptical attitude requires treating all knowledge as tentative and subject to change.

Research is a search for the negative (which means disconfirming data) and for alternative explanations (called rival hypotheses). What this requires is treating all knowledge as tentatively true or as true only until shown otherwise.

This is one of the ways in which public understandings of research are not similar to how researchers think. In daily life, people often talk about how one or another study proves something, but within the logic of research of all types (natural science and social science), it is not possible—or desirable—to prove anything. Research can confirm or disconfirm existing knowledge; new data can add to the existing evidence; new data can challenge existing knowledge, but nothing can be proved. It is necessary to think of research as not being able to prove anything, because there would be very negative consequences if things could be proved: If something is proved, there is no need to ever question
it, and that—simply stated—is not the way to increase knowledge. Everything in science, even something whose facticity is as assured as gravity, retains a formal status as a theory—something that could potentially be disproved. Most certainly, it is not that anyone expects that gravity will be disproved. Treating all knowledge as tentative is a general attitude that leads to questioning, to thinking, to not simply accepting what is presented as a “truth.”

Understand the Importance of Each Element of Research Design

Public understandings of research are not similar to the ways researchers think in another way: It is common for people in the public to limit their visions of research methods to techniques for generating data. Because of this, many people think of all research as equivalent to surveys, interviews, experiments, and so on. This is doubly unfortunate because the techniques used to obtain data are only one element of research design and because deciding what technique is best often comes at the end of the process of research design. Methodological thinking is being attentive to all elements in the design process, including what lies behind the scenes—theoretical perspectives, types of reasoning, understanding the study in relation to the existing scholarly dialogue, characteristics of the research questions, and conceptualization and operationalization. The likely ability of a research design to generate high-quality data depends upon all design elements.

High-quality research design is a package of components that are logically related to one another.

Think Both as a Scientist and as an Artist

Research methodology is a science because it is systematic, it requires understanding and correctly using a precise vocabulary, and it requires the competent use of rules. But all aspects of research—from design to implementation to data analysis—can reflect creativity. Sociologists talk about the importance of the sociological imagination, I think of this as the methodological imagination. How can we study topics such as racism when people are unlikely to honestly answer direct questions? How can we safely do research on dangerous topics, such as terrorism or drug dealing? How can we find people in “hidden” populations, such as immigrants who are undocumented? Answers to such questions are not found in rules governing social research; answers are found by thinking creatively.
Methodological thinking is logical and rule-bound, and people who are skilled at this kind of thinking have a good chance of becoming competent researchers. Yet excellent researchers often are more than technically competent—they are excellent, at least in part, because they are creative; they are driven by curiosity. As with good detectives, curious researchers will think. They will figure out creative ways to circumvent the untold numbers and kinds of roadblocks that social life throws up around its mysteries.

This is yet another way in which public understandings of research—or in this case, understandings of researchers—are partial. Yes, good researchers are very logical and systematic, but like effective detectives, good researchers also are creative.

**Know the Appropriate Uses of Social Research Tools**

The various components of research, from the different kinds of questions that can be asked to the different ways data and samples can be generated, can be understood as the research detective’s set of tools—equivalent to the carpenter’s tools of hammers, saws, and pliers. This has many implications. First and most clearly, good carpenters understand how to use more than one or two tools. Carpenters who say, “I like saws, so I won’t learn how to use hammers,” will be greatly confined in what they can build. The more tools a carpenter understands, the better. So it is in methods: Individual researchers might have personal preferences for some data generation techniques, some kinds of questions, or some forms of data, but it is a very good plan to understand as many as possible. It also is important to understand as many tools as possible to avoid the too-common problem of individuals who have strong skills in some kinds of tools and justify their choices by criticizing others. While it certainly is true that particular types of questions can best be answered by particular types of techniques or with particular types of data, it makes no sense to talk about how some tools are better than others. Just as it would make no sense for a carpenter to say that pliers are better than screwdrivers or that electricity is better than plumbing, it makes no sense for a researcher to say that observation is better than surveys or that inductive reasoning is better than deductive reasoning or any other such evaluation. As with carpenters’ tools, methodological tools are specialized: Surveys are the best way to collect some kinds of data but only some kinds of data; numbers tell us some things about the social world but only some things; sometimes we need to measure what people think while at other times we need to measure how people actually act, and so on. Methodological thinking means understanding as many research tools as possible. It is understanding that no one type of question, data, or tool used in research is better or worse than any other.
Chapter 1. Exploring the World of Social Research Design

Understand the Characteristics and Consequences of Methodological Diversity

These are exciting times in social research. As compared with the not-so-distant past, when there was general agreement that research in the social sciences should mimic the goals and organization of research in the natural sciences, our current world contains many choices in how to think about social research, how to design and conduct studies, how to analyze data, and how to present findings. The one model of social research in the past has been replaced with many models today.

This variety of choices is wonderful, because it allows researchers far more creativity than in the past. Yet possibilities for creativity come at a cost: Because there is no longer one accepted model of research, evaluations of the adequacy of research today often are more difficult than in the past. It is not uncommon for any one particular piece of research to be evaluated as excellent by some people, adequate by others, and perhaps as not adequate at all by still others. Methodological thinking requires learning more than one set of rules; it requires thinking about multiple choices and their consequences.

In this book, I hope to encourage you to develop the skills of methodological thinking. These skills will be the foundation upon which you can design high-quality research. Perhaps most important, I anticipate that most people reading this book will not go on to become social researchers, so the skills to design research might not seem important. Yet all of us are consumers of research in our daily lives. Methodological thinking is a skill that will serve you well in making decisions about the quality of research underlying the information that bombards us in daily life.

PLANNING THE STUDY OF RESEARCH DESIGN

I will again describe my goals just to remind you what I am and am not trying to do. I want to help you understand methodological thinking so that you can develop the skills to evaluate the quality of research done by others and to design your own research projects. My focus on how to think about research leads me to ignore or only briefly talk about the details of how to do research. I do so not because such details are unimportant. On the contrary, good research design must reflect adequate attention to all relevant technical details. Yet because there are many textbooks that do a very good job explaining the what and hows of social research, I will attend only to the why questions—the underlying logic of research design decisions.

The seven chapters following this introduction parallel the arrangement of chapters in many standard methods texts. Chapter 2, “Foundations,”
METHODOLOGICAL THINKING

considers foundational issues, including the components of all social research (data, concepts, and theories), relationships between data and concepts/theories (logic), and underlying models of social life (positivist, interpretive, and critical). These are very much like the foundations of houses—critical yet often all-but-invisible. Chapter 3, “Research Questions,” proceeds to the topic of writing and evaluating questions leading to research projects; Chapter 4, “Literature Reviews,” shows why and how every new research project should be a part of the ongoing scholarly dialogue. Chapter 5, “Measurement,” turns to the issue of measurement: how the events, objects, and people of interest in research are defined (conceptualized) and measured (operationalized), and how the quality of these conceptualizations and operationalizations can be evaluated. Chapter 6, “Data Generation Techniques,” is a summary of the most common ways to obtain data in social research projects (experiments, surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis), and Chapter 7, “Samples,” looks at the general issues of samples—be they samples of people interviewed, questions asked, places observed, or documents categorized. Finally, Chapter 8, “Summary: Writing and Evaluating Social Research Design,” begins with reminders about the importance of critical thinking and then centers on answering questions about how to write about social research design as well as some general ways in which design is evaluated.

I have arranged my comments into these chapters, which I then put in a particular order. While this is a satisfactory order for learning how to evaluate research done by others, I worry about the unintended consequences of my presentation on those of you wanting to design research yourself. I will comment in every chapter how it is incorrect to think of research design as a series of tasks that are done once and that are done in a particular order. People who design actual research often find that their original research questions must be modified based on what they learn by reading the existing literature on the topic and/or that the impossibility of obtaining particular samples leads to modifying research questions or proposed research techniques, and so on. I will return to the following point repeatedly, because it is important: Published reports of research typically are cleaned up; they do not include truthful descriptions of the actual messiness of the research process. If you are new to research design, simply assume that new information or problems arising at one stage of the design process will lead you to make changes in other aspects of your research design. When this happens, it will seem to be a setback. While frustrating, however, often what begins as a problem leads to changes in the research that makes research better. The actual process of designing research looks like the following diagram, with every design component influencing all others:
I like this diagram, because the double arrows (↔) truthfully show that every component of research design influences all others. This is good to remember, because the goal of design is to create research that is a package of ideas with each component—question, existing knowledge, measurement, data generation techniques, and samples—logically related to all others. At the same time, I don’t want you to really look closely at this and try to find the way out of the loop: It looks as if this is an endless process! That, of course, is not true; throughout this book I will talk about the very minor modifications that can sometimes be made that will make elements flow together logically.

METHODS IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

I think there is similarity between learning about research methods and learning music: You can read a book about how to play a piano, and you can memorize the scale and all the rules about playing the piano, but you will not
actually learn how to play until you sit down and do it. Likewise, you can read books defining the characteristics of “good music,” but to really understand the differences between good and not-so-good music, you need to listen to a lot of it. So it is with research methods. Abstract talk about methods is not enough to understand what methods look like in real research.

What I want to do is to merge abstract talk about methodology with how design appears in real research. In the appendix, you will find eight (highly edited) published articles that I will use throughout this book to demonstrate my points. A web-based student study site, available at www.sagepub.com/loseke, also provides access to the full versions of the journal articles that are referenced throughout the text. Because I will return to the same examples over and over, by the end, you should have a fairly detailed understanding of how methodological thinking applies in real-life research.

I used two criteria to choose my eight examples: First, each of my examples has the term identity in the title. I chose this topic because it is one of my current interests, because it is a topic explored by researchers in several disciplines, because it can be conceptualized in many ways, and because it leads to many different kinds of research questions. I hope this will encourage you to see an important characteristic of social research: There are multiple and equally good questions about any topic. Second, I selected articles in terms of their diversity in order to demonstrate how social research encompasses many varieties of perspectives on social life, types of data, and techniques of data collection.

I did not choose articles because I believed they represented especially excellent research. One of my recurring themes throughout this book will be that perfection is not a good standard upon which to evaluate social research. The complicated nature of humans and our lives together leads to many common problems that cannot be wished away. Of course, we always should strive for perfection and find ways to make research better, yet simultaneously we need to understand that less-than-perfect research can offer insights. While the articles I chose are not perfect, each does tell us something about the mysteries of social life.

That is my plan: I hope I can help you develop the ability to think methodologically about designing and evaluating social research.