CHAPTER 1

Science, Society, and Social Research

Online social networking services added a new dimension to the social world in the early years of the 21st century. Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook in 2004 as a service for college students like himself, but by September 30, 2013, Facebook (2013) had grown to be a global service with more than 1.19 billion users—more than one of every six people in the world and four out of every five persons in the United States (Internet World Statistics 2012; Statistic Brain 2013; U.S. Census Bureau 2013a). When we talk about our social world, social media must be part of the conversation.

And what about your social world? Has social networking helped you keep in touch with your friends? To make new friends? Is it changing your face-to-face interactions with other people? Are computer-mediated forms of communication enriching your social life?
Research That Matters, Questions That Count

How does wireless access to the Internet affect social life? Do people become less engaged with those around them? Will local community ties suffer? Since the development of the Internet in the 1980s, social scientists have been concerned with the impact of Internet connections on social interaction. Professor Keith Hampton at the University of Pennsylvania and Neeti Gupta at Microsoft investigated these questions by studying wireless Internet users in four coffee shops in Boston and Seattle. The researchers observed at each café for 30 hours, recording notes on the mobile device users’ gender and approximate age as well as on their interaction with customers and staff. Hampton and Gupta concluded that there were two types of Internet users in the coffee shops. Some Internet users were “true mobiles” who used the coffee shop as a place to work, for temporary or specific periods, and were largely disengaged from others around them. Hampton and Gupta found that other Internet users—“placemakers”—were primarily in the coffee shops to “hang out” and were very available for unplanned discussions with others about shared interests.

1. Have you observed the same differences in interaction as Hampton and Gupta did?
2. Do you think that their conclusions would have differed if they had studied coffee shops in other cities?
3. Why do you think some Internet users were “true mobiles” and others were “placemakers”? How could you test your explanation?
4. If you wanted to conduct a study like that of Hampton and Gupta, how would you determine whether a café user was a “true mobile” or a “placemaker”?

In this chapter, you will learn about methods used to study changes in social interaction and the conclusions from some of this research. By the end of the chapter, you will have a much firmer basis for answering the questions I have posed. After you finish the chapter, test yourself by reading the 2008 *New Media & Society* article by Keith Hampton and Neeti Gupta at the *Investigating the Social World* study site and completing the related interactive exercises for Chapter 1: edge.sagepub.com/schutt8e.


Let’s focus on these issues more systematically. Please answer each of the following questions by checking one of the response options:

1. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?
   - Most people can be trusted
   - You can’t be too careful
2. Do you use the Internet, at least occasionally?
   - Use Internet
   - Do not use Internet
3. Did you happen to use the Internet YESTERDAY?
   - Yes
   - No
4. Counting all of your online sessions, how much time did you spend using the Internet yesterday?
   ___ Less than 15 minutes
   ___ 15 minutes to less than half hour
   ___ Half hour or more but less than an hour
   ___ More than 1 hour but less than 2 hours
   ___ 2 hours or more but less than 3 hours
   ___ 3 hours or more but less than 4 hours
   ___ 4 hours or more

5. Please tell me if you ever use the Internet to do any of the following things. Do you ever use a social
   networking site like Myspace, Facebook, or LinkedIn?
   ___ Yes
   ___ No

6. Have you made a friend or contact on a social networking website like Myspace, Facebook, or LinkedIn?
   ___ Yes
   ___ No

7. Do you belong to or ever work with a community group or neighborhood association that focuses on
   issues or problems in your community?
   ___ Yes
   ___ No

Congratulations! You have just responded to some of the questions in the SNS [Social Networking Sites] and
Center Internet & American Life Project. Do your responses to these questions represent some aspects of your
own engagement in the social world? Do you think other questions should have been asked to give a fuller
picture? Do you wonder how your classmates responded? How others in the United States or other countries
responded? Did you consider whether your use of the Internet (questions 2–6) has any bearing on other aspects
of your social life (questions 1 and 7)?

You probably think about your use of social media and the Internet often and have asked yourself questions
like those I have just posed about its importance in your life. That’s where social researchers begin, with
questions about the social world and a desire to find answers to them. What makes social research different
from the ordinary process of thinking about our experiences is a focus on broader questions that involve people
outside our immediate experience, issues about why things happen that we may not otherwise consider, and
the use of systematic research methods to answer those questions. Keith N. Hampton, Lauren Sessions Goulet,
Lee Rainie, and Kirsten Purcell (2011) analyzed the responses received in the SNS and Facebook Survey and
reported that 79% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 22 use the Internet and 59% use social networking services, but this
usage complements their other social ties, rather than displacing them.

In this chapter, we focus on questions about Internet use, social networking services, and social ties. As we
do so, I hope to convince you that the use of research methods to investigate questions about the social
world results in knowledge that can be more important, more trustworthy, and more useful than can personal
opinions or individual experiences. You will learn how social scientists’ investigations are helpful in answering
questions about social ties and the impact of the Internet on these ties. You will also learn about the challenges
that researchers confront. By the chapter’s end, you should know what is “scientific” in social science and
appreciate how the methods of science can help us understand the problems of society.
Learning About the Social World

We can get a sense of how sociologists and other social scientists investigate the social world by reviewing some questions that social researchers have asked about the Internet and social ties and the ways they have answered those questions.

1. What percentage of Americans are connected to the Internet?

The 2011 Current Population Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau (File 2013a) of approximately 54,000 households revealed that 75% of U.S. households had a computer at home and almost that many were connected to the Internet (File 2013a). The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project 2010 survey of 2,255 adult Americans found that almost half used a social network service (Hampton et al. 2011). These percentages have increased rapidly since personal computers first came into use in the early 1980s and after the Internet became publicly available in the 1990s (see Exhibit 1.1).

![Exhibit 1.1 Percentage of Households With Computers and Internet Connections, 1997–2011](image)


2. How does Internet use vary across social groups?

Internet use differs dramatically between social groups. As indicated in Exhibit 1.2, Internet use in 2011 ranged from as low as 32% among those with less than a high school education to 90% among those with at least a bachelor’s degree (File 2013a), although Internet use has increased for all education levels since 1997 (Strickling 2010). Internet use also increases with family income and is higher among non-Hispanic whites and Asian Americans than among Hispanic Americans and non-Hispanic black Americans (Cooper & Gallagher 2004:Appendix, Table 1). Internet users younger than 30 are most likely to use social network sites (89% of those age 18 to 29), compared with those who are middle aged (78% among those age 30 to 49 and 60% of those age 50 to 64) or older (43% of those age 65 and older) (Pew Research Center 2013).
3. Does Internet use interfere with the maintenance of social ties?

It doesn’t seem so. The extent of social isolation—people not having anyone to confide in—did not change much from 1985 (8%) to 2008 (12%). However, results of another survey in 2004 led other researchers to conclude that social isolation had increased considerably since 1985 (Marsden 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears 2006:358 (see Exhibit 1.3). It seems that the design of the survey, changes in interpretation of a key question, and interviewer fatigue when asking the complex social network questions led to omission of some social network members from the answers (Fischer 2009; Hampton et al. 2009; Paika & Sanchagrina 2013). In fact, individuals who use the Internet tend to have larger and more diverse social networks than others do and are about as likely as those who do not use the Internet to participate in community activities. There is no better way to make the point at this early stage that even social science research projects can have errors; we must learn how to evaluate their methods carefully.

4. Does wireless access (Wi-Fi) in such public places as Starbucks decrease social interaction among customers?

As you learned in the initial example in this chapter, Hampton and Gupta (2008) observed Internet use in coffee shops with wireless access in two cities and concluded that there were two types of Wi-Fi users: some who used their Internet connection to create a secondary work office and others who used their Internet connection as a tool for meeting others in the coffee shop. What this means is that Wi-Fi was associated with less social interaction among some customers, but more interaction among others.

5. Do cell phones and e-mail tend to hinder the development of strong social ties?

Based on surveys in Norway and Denmark, Rich Ling and Gitte Stald (2010) concluded that mobile phones increase social ties among close friends and family members, whereas e-mail communication tends to decrease the intensity of our focus on close friends and family members. Other research by the Pew Center has identified positive effects of the Internet and e-mail on social ties (Boase et al. 2006).

Did your personal experiences lead you to expect different answers to these questions? You have just learned that those with more education use the Internet more than do those with less education. Does this variability lead
you to be cautious about using your own experience as a basis for estimating the behavior of others (#2)? Have you heard others complain about the effect of the Internet on the maintenance of social ties? Is it safe to draw general conclusions from this anecdotal evidence (#3)? Have you been sensitive to the effects of surroundings and of mode of communication on different people (#4 and #5)?

We cannot avoid asking questions about our complex social world or trying to make sense of our position in it. Actually, the more that you begin to “think like a social scientist,” the more such questions will come to mind—and that’s a good thing! But as you’ve just seen, in our everyday reasoning about the social world, our own prior experiences and orientations can have a major influence on what we perceive and how we interpret these perceptions. As a result, one person may see a person posting a message on Facebook as being typical of what’s wrong with modern society, but another person may see the same individual as helping people “get connected” with others. We need to move beyond first impressions and gut reactions to more systematic methods of investigation.

Avoiding Errors in Reasoning About the Social World

How can we avoid errors rooted in the particularities of our own backgrounds and improve our reasoning about the social world? First, let’s identify the different processes involved in learning about the social world and the types of errors that can result as we reason about the social world.

When we learn about the social world, we engage in one or more of four processes: (1) “observing” through our five senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, or smelling); (2) generalizing from what we have observed to other times, places, or people; (3) reasoning about the connections between different things that we have observed; and (4) reevaluating our understanding of the social world on the basis of these processes. It is easy to make mistakes with each of these processes.

My favorite example of the errors in reasoning that occur in the nonscientific, unreflective discourse about the social world that we hear on a daily basis comes from a letter to famous advice columnist Ann Landers. The
letter was written by someone who had just moved with her two cats from the city to a house in the country. In the city, she had not let her cats outside and felt guilty about confining them. When they arrived in the country, she threw her back door open. Her two cats cautiously went to the door and looked outside for a while, then returned to the living room and lay down. Her conclusion was that people shouldn’t feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors—even when they have the chance, cats don’t really want to play outside.

Do you see this person’s errors in her approach to

- **Observing**? She observed the cats at the outside door only once.
- **Generalizing**? She observed only two cats, both of which previously were confined indoors.
- **Reasoning**? She assumed that others feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors and that cats are motivated by feelings about opportunities to play.
- **Reevaluating**? She was quick to conclude that she had no need to change her approach to the cats.

You don’t have to be a scientist or use sophisticated research techniques to avoid these four errors in reasoning. If you recognize these errors for what they are and make a conscious effort to avoid them, you can improve your own reasoning about the social world. In the process, you will also be implementing the admonishments of your parents (or minister, teacher, or any other adviser) to avoid stereotyping people, to avoid jumping to conclusions, and to look at the big picture. These are the same errors that the methods of social science are designed to help us avoid.

**Observing**

One common mistake in learning about the social world is **selective observation**—choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs. When we are inclined to criticize individuals or institutions, it is all too easy to notice their every failure. For example, if we are convinced in advance that all heavy Internet users are antisocial, we can find many confirming instances. But what about elderly people who serve as Internet pen pals for grade-school children? Doctors who exchange views on medical developments? Therapists who deliver online counseling? Couples who maintain their relationship when working in faraway cities? If we acknowledge only the instances that confirm our predispositions, we are victims of our own selective observation.

Our observations can also simply be inaccurate. If, after a quick glance around the computer lab, you think there are 14 students present, when there are actually 17, you have made an **inaccurate observation**. If you hear a speaker say that “for the oppressed, the flogging never really stops,” when what she said was, “For the obsessed, the blogging never really stops” (Hafner 2004), you have made an inaccurate observation.

Such errors occur often in casual conversation and in everyday observation of the world around us. In fact, our perceptions do not provide a direct window onto the world around us, for what we think we have sensed is not necessarily what we have seen (or heard, smelled, felt, or tasted). Even when our senses are functioning fully, our minds have to interpret what we have sensed (Humphrey 1992). The optical illusion in Exhibit 1.4, which can be viewed as either two faces or a vase, should help you realize that perceptions involve interpretations. Different observers may perceive the same situation differently because they interpret it differently.

**Generalizing**

**Overgeneralization** occurs when we conclude that what we have observed or what we know to be true for some cases is true for all or most cases (Exhibit 1.5). We are always...
drawing conclusions about people and social processes from our own interactions with them and perceptions of them, but sometimes we forget that our experiences are limited. The social (and natural) world is, after all, a complex place. We have the ability (and inclination) to interact with just a small fraction of the individuals who inhabit the social world, especially within a limited span of time. Thanks to the Internet, social media, and the practice of “blogging” (i.e., posting personal ruminations on websites), we can easily find many examples of overgeneralization in people’s thoughts about the social world. Here’s one posted by a frequent blogger who was called for jury duty (http://busblog.tonypierce.com/2005/06/yesterday-i-had-to-go-to-jury-duty-to.html, posted on June 17, 2005):

yesterday i had to go to jury duty to perform my civil duty. unlike most people i enjoy jury duty because i find the whole legal process fascinating, especially when its unfolding right in front of you and you get to help decide yay or nay.

Do you know what the majority of people think about jury duty? According to a Harris Poll, 75% of Americans consider jury service to be a privilege (Grey 2005), so the blogger’s generalization about “most people” is not correct. Do you ever find yourself making a quick overgeneralization like that?

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Exhibit 1.5
The Difference Between Selective Observation and Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization:
Those people are never satisfied.

Selective Observation:
Those people are never satisfied.
Reasoning

When we prematurely jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions, we are using illogical reasoning. An Internet blogger posted a conclusion about the cause of the tsunami wave that devastated part of Indonesia in 2004 (cited in Schwartz 2005):

Since we know that the atmosphere has become contaminated by all the atomic testing, space stuff, electronic stuff, earth pollutants, etc., is it logical to wonder if: Perhaps the “bones” of our earth where this earthquake spawned have also been affected?

Is that logical? Another blogger soon responded with an explanation of plate tectonics: “The floor of the Indian Ocean slid over part of the Pacific Ocean” (Schwartz 2005:A9). The earth’s crust moves no matter what people do!

It is not always so easy to spot illogical reasoning. For example, about 72% of American households now use the Internet (File 2013a). Would it be reasonable to propose that the 28% who don’t participate in the “information revolution” avoid it simply because they don’t want to participate? In fact, many low-income households lack the financial resources to buy a computer or maintain an online account and so they use the Internet much less frequently; that’s probably not because they don’t want to use it (Rainie & Horrigan 2005:63). Conversely, an unquestioned assumption that everyone wants to connect to the Internet may overlook some important considerations; for example, 17% of nonusers of the Internet said in 2002 that the Internet has made the world a worse place, so they may not use it because they don’t like what they believe to be its effects (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003:78). Logic that seems impeccable to one person can seem twisted to another.

Reevaluating

Resistance to change, the reluctance to reevaluate our ideas in light of new information, may occur for several reasons:

• Ego-based commitments. We all learn to greet with some skepticism the claims by leaders of companies, schools, agencies, and so on that people in their organization are happy, that revenues are growing, and that services are being delivered in the best possible way. We know how tempting it is to make statements about the social world that conform to our own needs rather than to the observable facts. It can also be difficult to admit that we were wrong once we have staked out a position on an issue. Barry Wellman (Boase et al. 2006:1) recounts a call from a reporter after the death of four “cyber addicts.” The reporter was already committed to the explanation that computer use had caused the four deaths; now, he just wanted an appropriate quote from a computer-use expert, such as Wellman. But the interview didn’t last long:

The reporter lost interest when Wellman pointed out that other causes might be involved, that “addicts” were a low percentage of users, and that no one worries about “neighboring addicts” who chat daily in their front yards. (Boase et al. 2006:1)

• Excessive devotion to tradition. Some degree of devotion to tradition is necessary for the predictable functioning of society. Social life can be richer and more meaningful if it is allowed to flow along the paths charted by those who have preceded us. Some skepticism about the potential for online learning once served as a healthy antidote to unrealistic expectations of widespread student enthusiasm (Bray 1999). But too much devotion to tradition can stifle adaptation to changing circumstances. When we distort our observations or alter our reasoning so that we can maintain beliefs that “were good enough for my grandfather, so they’re good enough for me,” we hinder our ability to accept new findings and develop new knowledge. Of course, there was
nothing “traditional” about maintaining social ties through e-mail when this first became possible in the late 20th century. Many social commentators assumed that the result of increasing communication by e-mail would be fewer social ties maintained through phone calls and personal contact. As a result, it was claimed, the social world would be impoverished. But subsequent research indicated that people who used e-mail more also kept in touch with others more in person and by phone (Benkler 2006:356; Boase et al. 2006).

- **Uncritical agreement with authority.** If we do not have the courage to evaluate critically the ideas of those in positions of authority, we will have little basis for complaint if they exercise their authority over us in ways we don’t like. And, if we do not allow new discoveries to challenge our beliefs, our understanding of the social world will remain limited. Was it partly uncritical agreement with computer industry authorities that led so many to utopian visions for the future of the Internet? “Entrepreneurs saw it as a way to get rich, policy makers thought it could remake society, and business people hoped that online sales would make stock prices soar. Pundits preached the gospel of the new Internet millennium” (Wellman 2004:25).

Now take just a minute to reexamine the opinions about social ties and Internet use that you recorded earlier. Did you grasp at a simple explanation even though reality is far more complex? Did your own ego and feelings about your similarities to or differences from others influence your beliefs? Did you weigh carefully the opinions of authorities who decry the decline of “community”? Could knowledge of research methods help improve your own understanding of the social world? Do you see some of the challenges social science faces?
Social science relies on scientific methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes. It is important to realize that when we apply scientific methods to understanding ourselves, we often engage in activities—asking questions, observing social groups, or counting people—that are similar to things we do in our everyday lives. However, social scientists develop, refine, apply, and report their understanding of the social world more systematically, or “scientifically,” than Joanna Q. Public does:

- Social science research methods can reduce the likelihood of overgeneralization by using systematic procedures for selecting individuals or groups to study that are representative of the individuals or groups to which we want to generalize.
- To avoid illogical reasoning, social researchers use explicit criteria for identifying causes and for determining whether these criteria are met in a particular instance.
- Social science methods can reduce the risk of selective or inaccurate observation by requiring that we measure and sample phenomena systematically.
- Because they require that we base our beliefs on evidence that can be examined and critiqued by others, scientific methods lessen the tendency to develop answers about the social world from ego-based commitments, excessive devotion to tradition, or unquestioning respect for authority.

Even as you learn to appreciate the value of social science methods, however, you shouldn’t forget that social scientists face three specific challenges:

1. The objects of our research are people like us, so biases rooted in our personal experiences and relationships are more likely to influence our conclusions.
2. Those we study can evaluate us, even as we study them. As a result, subjects’ decisions to “tell us what they think we want to hear” or, alternatively, to refuse to cooperate in our investigations can produce misleading evidence.
3. In physics or chemistry, research subjects (objects and substances) may be treated to extreme conditions and then discarded when they are no longer useful. However, social (and medical) scientists must concern themselves with the way their human subjects are treated in the course of research (much could also be said about research on animals, but this isn’t the place for that).

We must never be so impressed with the use of scientific methods in investigations of the social world that we forget to evaluate carefully the quality of the resulting evidence. And we cannot ignore the need always to treat people ethically, even when that involves restrictions on the manipulations in our experiments, the questions in our surveys, or the observations in our field studies.

Pseudoscience or Science

We must also be on guard against our natural tendency to be impressed with knowledge that is justified with what sounds like scientific evidence, but which has not really been tested. Pseudoscience claims are not always easy to identify, and many people believe them (Shermer 1997:33).

Are you surprised that more than half of Americans believe in astrology, with all its charts and numbers and references to stars and planets, even though astrological predictions have been tested and found baseless (Shermer 1997:26)? Are any of your beliefs based on pseudoscience?
Motives for Social Research

Similar to you, social scientists have friends and family, observe other persons’ social ties, and try to make sense of what they experience and observe. For most, that’s the end of it. But for some social scientists, the quality and impact of social ties has become a major research focus. What motivates selection of this or any other particular research focus? Usually, it’s one or more of the following reasons:

- **Policy motivations.** Many government agencies, elected officials, and private organizations seek better descriptions of social ties in the modern world so they can identify unmet strains in communities, deficits in organizations, or marketing opportunities. Public officials may need information for planning zoning restrictions in residential neighborhoods. Law enforcement agencies may seek to track the connections between criminal gangs and the effect of social cohesion on the crime rate. Military leaders may seek to strengthen unit cohesion. These policy guidance and program management needs can stimulate numerous research projects.

  As Kathleen Cooper and Nancy Victory (2002) said in their foreword to a U.S. Department of Commerce report on the Census Bureau’s survey of Internet use,

  This information will be useful to a wide variety of policymakers and service providers . . . help all of us determine how we can reach Americans more effectively and take maximum advantage of the opportunities available through new information technologies. (p. iii)

- **Academic motivations.** Questions about changing social relations have stimulated much academic social science. One hundred years ago, Émile Durkheim (1951) linked social processes stemming from urbanization and industrialization to a higher rate of suicide. Fifty years ago, David Reisman (1950/1969) considered whether the growing role of the mass media, among other changes, was leading Americans to become a “lonely crowd.” Similar to this earlier research, contemporary investigations of the effect of computers and the Internet are often motivated by a desire to understand influences on the strength and meaning of social bonds. Does a “virtual community” in cyberspace perform the same functions as face-to-face social relationships (Norris 2004)? The desire to understand better how the social world works is motivation enough for many social scientists (Hampton & Wellman 2001):

  It is time to move from speculation to evidence. . . . The growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) introduces a new means of social contact with the potential to affect many aspects of personal communities. . . . This article examines . . . how this technology affected contact and support. (pp. 477, 479)

- **Personal motivations.** Some social scientists who conduct research on social ties feel that by doing so they can help improve the quality of communities, the effectiveness of organizations, or the physical and mental health of many social groups. Social scientists may become interested in social ties as a result of exposure to problems in the social world, or by watching the challenges their children face in school, or for many other reasons, including finding themselves without many friends after a career move. Exhibit 1.6 displays a photograph of Mexican immigrants living in poverty. Can you imagine a college student, in later years, developing an interest in research on poverty in other countries as a result of a study abroad experience that exposed her to such sights?

Types of Social Research

Whatever the motives, there are four types of social research projects. This section illustrates each type with projects from the large body of research about various aspects of social ties.
Descriptive research: Research in which social phenomena are defined and described.

Descriptive Research

Defining and describing social phenomena of interest is a part of almost any research investigation, but descriptive research is often the primary focus of the first research about some issue. Descriptive questions asked in research on social ties have included the following: What is the level of particular types of social ties in America (McPherson et al. 2006)? What social and cultural patterns characterize disadvantaged neighborhoods (Harding 2007)? What types of social ties do Internet users have (Nie & Erbring 2000)? Measurement (the topic of Chapter 4) and sampling (Chapter 5) are central concerns in descriptive research. Survey research (Chapter 8) is often used for descriptive purposes. Some comparative research also has a descriptive purpose (Chapter 13).

Example: Comings and goings on Facebook? Lee Rainie, Director of the Pew Internet Project, and his colleagues Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan (2013) sought to describe the frequency with which Americans stopped using Facebook and the reasons they did so. To investigate this issue, they surveyed 1,006 American adults by phone and asked them such questions as,

Do you ever use Facebook?

and

Have you ever voluntarily taken a break from using Facebook for a period of several weeks or more?

They found that two thirds of American adults who use the Internet also use Facebook and that most (61%) say they have voluntarily taken a break from using Facebook at some time for at least several weeks (Rainie et al. 2013). Rainie et al. also found that one fifth of Internet users said they had once used Facebook but no longer do
so, whereas almost 1 in 10 Internet users who had not used Facebook were interested in doing so. Among those who had stopped using Facebook at some point, reasons for the “break” included not having enough time, lacking interest in the site, not seeing valuable content, and disliking gossiping by their friends.

As indicated in Exhibit 1.7, Rainie et al. also found that women were more likely to report increased interest in Facebook and to expect increased use in the next year.

**Exploratory Research**

Exploratory research seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn “What is going on here?” and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information or that take a field of inquiry in a new direction. For example, researchers investigating social ties occurring through the Internet had to reexamine the meaning of “community,” asking whether cyberspace interactions can constitute a community that is seen as “real and essential” to participants (Fox & Roberts 1999:644). “How is identity—true or counterfeit—established in online communities?” asked Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (1999:9). How can elderly people use the Internet to manage their heart conditions better (Loader et al. 2002)? Exploratory research such as this frequently involves qualitative methods, which are the focus of Chapters 10 and 11, as well as special sections in many other chapters.

**Example: Can Internet resources help elderly persons manage heart conditions?** The Internet provides a “space where disparate individuals can find mutual solace and exchange information within a common community of interest” (Loader et al. 2002:53). It is easy to understand why these features of the Internet “space” have made it a popular medium for individuals seeking help for health problems. Too often, however, elderly persons who grew up without computers do not benefit from this potentially important resource.

**Exhibit 1.7 The Value of Facebook**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More important</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased time</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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</tbody>
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British social scientists Sally Lindsay, Simon Smith, Frances Bell, and Paul Bellaby (2007) were impressed with the potential of Internet-based health resources and wondered how access to those resources might help elderly persons manage heart conditions. Lindsay and her colleagues decided to explore this question by introducing a small group of older men to computers and the Internet and then letting them discuss their experiences with using the Internet for the next 3 years. Through the Internet, participants sought support from others with similar health problems, they helped others to cope, and they learned more about their condition.

Lindsay and her colleagues read through transcripts of interviews and a guided group discussion with their participants. The researchers then identified different themes and categorized text passages in terms of the themes and their interrelations. Two researchers read each transcript and compared their classifications of themes. These two researchers also discussed their interpretations of what they learned with their coauthors as well as with two of the elderly interviewees. For example, the researchers categorized one passage as showing how the Internet could help reduce fear about participants’ heart conditions: “There’s a lot of information there. It makes you feel a lot better. It takes a lot of the fear away. It’s a horrible feeling once you’ve had a heart attack” (Lindsay et al. 2007:103).

In general, 3 years after being introduced to the Internet, “the majority were more informed and confident about managing their health and had developed strategies for meeting their specific informational needs and making better informed decisions” (Lindsay et al. 2007:107).

The Internet provided these new users with both more knowledge and greater social support in dealing with their health problems.

### Explanatory Research

Many consider explanation the premier goal of any science. Explanatory research seeks to identify the causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon. Internet researchers adopted explanation as a goal when they began to ask such questions as “Does the Internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital?” (Wellman et al. 2001). “Do students who meet through Internet interaction like each other more than those who meet face-to-face?” (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons 2002:41). And “how [does] the Internet affect the role and use of the traditional media?” (Nie & Erbring 2002:276). I focus on ways of identifying causal effects in Chapter 6. Explanatory research often involves experiments (see Chapter 7) or surveys (see Chapter 8), both of which are most likely to use quantitative methods.

**Example: What effect does Internet use have on social relations?** Jeffrey Boase, John B. Horrigan, Barry Wellman, and Lee Rainie (2006), sociologists at the University of Toronto at the time (Boase and Wellman) and researchers at the Pew Internet Project (Horrigan and Rainie), sought to understand how the Internet is affecting community life in general and the maintenance of social ties in particular. For this purpose, they analyzed data from two phone surveys, conducted in 2004 and 2005, of 4,401 Americans. The surveys included questions about Internet use, social ties, help seeking, and decision making.

Boase and his coauthors (2006) found that the Internet and e-mail help people maintain dispersed social networks and do not conflict with the maintenance of social ties in the local community involving personal or phone contact. The researchers actually found that people who have more in-person and phone connections also tend to use the Internet more. The social value of the Internet is also increased because it is used to seek help and make decisions at important times.

Other social researchers have also found that the Internet can be “a catalyst for creating and maintaining friendships and family relationships” (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2001:8; see also Stern & Dillman 2006), despite concerns by some that using the Internet may interfere with other types of social ties (Nie & Erbring 2000).
for-profit businesses. This is a type of explanatory research because it deals with cause and effect, but it differs from other forms of explanatory research because evaluation research focuses on one type of cause: programs, policies, and other conscious efforts to create change (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao 2004:337). This focus raises some issues that are not relevant in other types of explanatory research. Concern regarding the potential impact of alternative policies regarding the Internet provided an impetus for new evaluation research. Chapter 12 introduces evaluation research.

**Example: Does high-speed Internet access change community life?** Netville’s developers connected all homes in this new suburban Toronto community with a high-speed cable and appropriate devices for Internet access. Sociologists Barry Wellman and Keith Hampton (1999) used this arrangement to evaluate the impact of Internet access on social relations. They surveyed Netville residents who were connected to the Internet and compared them with residents who had not activated their computer connections. Hampton actually lived in Netville for 2 years, participating in community events and taking notes on social interaction.

It proved to be difficult to begin research in a rapidly developing community (Hampton & Wellman 1999), but a combination of household surveys and participant observation, supplemented by analysis of postings to the community e-mail list and special group discussions (focus groups), resulted in a comprehensive investigation of the role of the computer network in community social life (Hampton & Wellman 2000).

Hampton and Wellman found that Internet access increased social relations of residents (“Ego” in Exhibit 1.8) with other households, resulting in a larger and less geographically concentrated circle of friends. E-mail was used to set up face-to-face social events rather than as a substitute for them. Information about home repair and other personal and community topics and residents’ service needs were exchanged over the Internet. Sensitive personal topics, however, were discussed offline. Although wired residents knew more people within Netville by name and talked to more people on a regular basis than did the nonwired residents, they were not more likely to actually visit other residents (Hampton 2003:422). Hampton and Wellman also found that being wired into the computer network enabled residents to maintain more effectively their relations with friends and relatives elsewhere. Overall, community ties were enriched and extra-community social ties were strengthened (Hampton & Wellman 2001).

**Exhibit 1.8**

The Development of Social Ties in a New Wired and Nonwired Neighborhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>nonwired, settled</th>
<th>wired, settled</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
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<td>Ego</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing tie</td>
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CAREERS AND RESEARCH
Jessica LeBlanc, Research Assistant

Jessica LeBlanc majored in sociology at the University of New Hampshire, but she didn’t really know what kind of career it would lead to. Then she took an undergraduate statistics course and found she really enjoyed it. She took additional methods courses—survey research and an individual research project course—and really liked those also.

By the time she graduated, LeBlanc knew she wanted a job in social research. She looked online for research positions in marketing, health care, and other areas. She noticed an opening at the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at the University of Massachusetts in Boston and thought their work sounded fascinating. The job description said “MA preferred,” but within a week she had an interview and then was hired. LeBlanc liked CSR because it was academic, had a wide range of projects, and had many that were focused on her primary interests in health.

As a Research Assistant II, LeBlanc designed survey questions, transcribed focus group audiotapes, programmed web surveys, and managed incoming data. She also conducted interviews, programmed computer-assisted telephone surveys, and helped conduct focus groups.

The knowledge that LeBlanc gained in her methods courses about research designs, statistics, question construction, and survey procedures prepared her well for her position at CSR. She has found that it’s important to understand validity and reliability and the basics of statistical software. Her advice to aspiring researchers: Pay attention in your first methods class!

LeBlanc has also benefited from on-the-job training. In her first year, she learned the ins and outs of the center and social research, she completed an online course in human subjects protections, and she learned how to conduct cognitive interviews and moderate focus groups. She’s also learned how to use Microsoft Access and Excel and how to program surveys delivered through computers. Overall, LeBlanc enjoys the nitty-gritty and hands-on, day-to-day management tasks.

Alternative Research Orientations

In addition to deciding on the type of research they will conduct, social researchers also must choose among several alternative orientations to research. Some researchers always adopt the same orientation in their research, but others vary their orientation based on the research particulars. It’s also possible to combine these alternative orientations in different ways. I introduce alternative orientations in this chapter that represent answers to three important questions that must be considered when you begin a research project: (1) Will the research use primarily quantitative or qualitative methods, or some mixture? (2) Will your guiding philosophy in the research be more “positivist,” with a focus on social realities, or more “constructivist,” with a focus on the meanings that people create? (3) Is the goal to accumulate new knowledge (basic science) or to make a practical contribution (applied research), or to do both?

Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods

Did you notice the difference between the types of data used in the studies about the Internet? The primary data used in the descriptive survey about Facebook use were counts of the number of people who had particular numbers of social ties and particular kinds of social ties, as well as their age, education, and other characteristics (Rainie et al. 2013). These data were numerical, so we say that this study used quantitative methods. The Census Bureau survey (Strickling 2010), the Lewis research
(Lewis et al. 2008), and the Ling and Stald (2010) research also used quantitative methods—they reported their findings as percentages and other statistics that summarized the relationship between Internet usage and various aspects of social relations. In contrast, Hampton and Gupta (2008) observed Wi-Fi users in public spaces. Because the researchers recorded their actual observations and did not attempt to quantify what they were studying, we say that Hampton and Gupta (2008) used qualitative methods.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods involves more than just the type of data collected. Quantitative methods are most often used when the motives for research are explanation, description, or evaluation. Exploration is more often the motive for using qualitative methods, although researchers also use these methods for descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative purposes. I highlight several other differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in the next two chapters. Chapters 10 and 11 present qualitative methods in much more detail. Chapter 3 introduces the alternative research philosophies that often lie behind the preference for quantitative or qualitative methods.

Important as it is, I don’t want to place too much emphasis on the distinction between quantitative and qualitative orientations or methods. Social scientists often combine these methods to enrich their research. For example, Hampton and Wellman (2000) used surveys to generate counts of community network usage and other behaviors in Netville, but to help interpret these behaviors, they also observed social interaction and recorded spoken comments. In this way, qualitative data about social settings can be used to understand patterns in quantitative data better (Campbell & Russo 1999:141).

The use of multiple methods to study one research question is called triangulation. The term suggests that a researcher can get a clearer picture of the social reality being studied by viewing it from several different perspectives. Each will have some liabilities in a specific research application, and all can benefit from a combination of one or more other methods (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Sechrest & Sidani 1995).

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not always sharp. Qualitative data can be converted to quantitative data when we count the frequency of particular words or phrases in a text or measure the time elapsed between different observed behaviors. Surveys that collect primarily quantitative data may also include questions asking for written responses, and these responses may be used in a qualitative, textual analysis. Qualitative researchers may test explicit explanations of social phenomena using textual or observational data. We consider a mixed-method strategy in more detail in Chapter 15 and we examine particular combinations of methods in most other chapters.

### Positivist or Constructivist Philosophies

Your general assumptions about how the social world can best be investigated—your social research philosophy—will partly shape your investigations of the social world. Researchers with a positivist philosophy believe that an objective reality exists apart from the perceptions of those who observe it, and that the goal of science is to understand this reality better. This is the philosophy traditionally associated with natural science, with the expectation that there are universal laws of human behavior, and with the belief that scientists must be objective and unbiased to see reality clearly (Weber 1949:72). **Positivism** asserts that a well-designed test of a specific prediction—for example, the prediction that social ties decrease among those who use the Internet more—can move us closer to understanding actual social processes. Quantitative researchers are often guided by a positivist philosophy.

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**Qualitative methods**: Methods such as participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher. These methods rely on written or spoken words or observations that do not often have a direct numerical interpretation and typically involve exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, an orientation to social context and human subjectivity, and the meanings attached by participants to events and to their lives.

**Triangulation**: The use of multiple methods to study one research question, also used to mean the use of two or more different measures of the same variable.

**Positivism**: The belief, shared by most scientists, that there is a reality that exists quite apart from our own perception of it, that it can be understood through observation, and that it follows general laws.
Postpositivism is a philosophy that is closely related to positivism because it also assumes an external, objective reality, but postpositivists acknowledge the complexity of this reality and the limitations and biases of the scientists who study it (Guba & Lincoln 1994:109–111). For example, postpositivists may worry that researchers, who are heavy computer users themselves, will be biased in favor of finding positive social effects of computer use. As a result of concerns such as this, postpositivists do not think we can ever be sure that scientific methods allow us to perceive objective reality. Instead, they believe that the goal of science is to achieve intersubjective agreement among scientists about the nature of reality (Wallace 1983:461). We can be more confident in the community of social researchers than in any individual social scientist (Campbell & Russo 1999:144).

The positivist and postpositivist philosophies consider value considerations to be beyond the scope of science: “An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he should do—but rather what he can do—and under certain circumstances—what he wishes to do” (Weber 1949:54). The idea is that developing valid knowledge about how society is organized, or how we live our lives, does not tell us how society should be organized or how we should live our lives. The determination of empirical facts should be a separate process from the evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory (Weber 1949:11). The idea is not to ignore value considerations, but to hold them in abeyance during the research project, until results are published.

Qualitative research is often guided by the philosophy of constructivism. Constructivist social scientists believe that social reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to reality, not to determine how reality works apart from these constructions. This philosophy rejects the positivist belief that there is a concrete, objective reality that scientific methods help us understand (Lynch & Bogen 1997); instead, constructivists believe that people construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others and that this is as true of scientists as it is of everyone else in the social world. This means that we can never be sure that we have understood reality properly, that “objects and events are understood by different people differently, and those perceptions are the reality—or realities—that social science should focus on” (Rubin & Rubin 1995:35).

Constructivism emphasizes that different stakeholders in a social setting construct different beliefs (Guba & Lincoln 1989:44–45). Constructivists give particular attention to the different goals of researchers and other participants in a research setting and may seek to develop a consensus among participants about how to understand the focus of inquiry (Sulkunen 2008:73): “Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time” (Schwandt 1994:128). Interpretivism is a related research philosophy that emphasizes the importance of understanding subjective meanings people give to reality without believing that reality itself is socially constructed.

Constructivist inquiry may use an interactive research process, in which a researcher begins an evaluation in some social setting by identifying the different interest groups in that setting. In a circular process known as a hermeneutic circle (Exhibit 1.9), the researcher interviews each respondent (R1, R2, etc.) to learn how they “construct” their thoughts and feelings about the topic of concern (C1, C2, etc.), and then gradually tries to develop a shared perspective on the problem being evaluated (Guba & Lincoln 1989:42, 180–181).

Feminist research is a term used to refer to research done by feminists (Reinharz 1992:6–7) and to a perspective on research that can involve many
different methods (Reinharz 1992:240). The feminist perspective on research includes the interpretivist and constructivist elements of concern with personal experience and subjective feelings and with the researcher's position and standpoint (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2007:4–5). Feminist researchers Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (2007:139) emphasize the importance of viewing the social world as complex and multilayered, of sensitivity to the impact of social differences, of being an “insider” or an “outsider,” and of being concerned with the researcher’s position. African American feminist researcher Patricia Hill Collins (1991) suggests that researchers who are sensitive to their “outside” role within a social situation may have unique advantages:

Outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see. (p. 53)

**Basic Science or Applied Research**

You know that social scientists seek to describe and explain how society works. McPherson et al. (2006) sought to answer questions such as, “How do social ties vary between people or societies?” and “Why do some people, groups, or societies have more social ties than others?” Other researchers have investigated the meaning people attach to social ties and the consequences of having fewer social ties. The effort to figure out what the world is like and why it works as it does—academic motivations—is the goal of basic science (Hammersley 2008:50).
Social research may also have more immediate, practical concerns. Evaluation research like that conducted by Hampton and Wellman (1999) seeks to determine whether one program or policy has a more desirable impact than another does. This knowledge can then lead to practical changes, such as increasing community members' access to the Internet so that their possibilities for social relations will expand. Evaluation research and other social research motivated by practical concerns are termed **applied research**.

Do you think that doing applied research would be good for society as well as for social researchers? Or do you think that a focus on how to improve society might lead social researchers to distort their understanding of how society works? Whether you think you would prefer a basic or applied orientation in social research, you have lots of company. In the 19th century, sociologist Lester Frank Ward (who subsequently became the American Sociological Society’s first president) endorsed applied research: “The real object of science is to benefit man. A science which fails to do this, however agreeable its study, is lifeless” (Ward 1897:xxvii).

But in 1929, the American Sociological Society President William Fielding Ogburn urged sociologists to be guided by a basic research orientation: “Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place to live. . . . Science is interested directly in one thing only, to wit, discovering new knowledge” (Ogburn 1930:300–301).

Tension between basic and applied research orientations has continued ever since these early disputes. Lynn Smith-Lovin (2007), who collaborated with Miller McPherson in the “social isolation” study, has argued recently for the importance of the basic science orientation: “I would, indeed, argue for knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (p. 127).

In contrast, Robert Bellah, and his *Habits of the Heart* coauthors (1985) urged social scientists to focus explicit attention on achieving a more just society:

Social science . . . whether it admits it or not, makes assumptions about good persons and a good society and considers how far these conceptions are embodied in our actual society. . . . By probing the past as well as the present, by looking at “values” as much as at “facts,” such a social science [as “public philosophy”] is able to make connections that are not obvious and to ask difficult questions. (p. 301)

You will encounter examples of basic and applied research throughout this book. By the time you finish *Investigating the Social World*, I know you’ll have a good understanding of the difference between these orientations, but I can’t predict whether you’ll decide one is preferable. Maybe you’ll conclude that they both have some merit.

**Strengths and Limitations of Social Research**

Using social scientific research methods to develop answers to questions about the social world reduces the likelihood of making everyday errors in reasoning. The various projects that we have reviewed in this chapter illustrate this point:

- A clear definition of the population of interest in each study increased the researchers’ ability to draw conclusions without overgeneralizing findings to groups to which they did not apply. Selection of a data set based on a broad, representative sample of the population enabled McPherson et al. (2006) to describe social ties throughout the United States rather than among some unknown set of their friends or acquaintances. The researchers’ explicit recognition that persons who do not speak English were not included in their data set helps prevent overgeneralization to groups that were not actually studied (McPherson et al. 2006:356).

- The use of surveys in which each respondent was asked the same set of questions reduced the risk of selective or inaccurate observation, as did careful attention to a range of measurement issues (McPherson et al. 2006:355–356).
The risk of illogical reasoning was reduced by carefully describing each stage of the research, clearly presenting the findings, and carefully testing the bases for cause-and-effect conclusions. For example, Ling and Stald (2010) tested to see whether age or gender, rather than cell phone use, might have increased the tightness of social group ties in Norway.

Resistance to change was reduced by providing free computers to participants in the Internet health study (Lindsay et al. 2007:100). The publications by all the researchers help other researchers critique and learn from their findings as well as inform the general public.

Nevertheless, I would be less than honest if I implied that we enter the realm of truth and light when we conduct social research or when we rely solely on the best available social research. Research always has some limitations and some flaws (as does any human endeavor), and our findings are always subject to differing interpretations. Social research permits us to see more, to observe with fewer distortions, and to describe more clearly to others what our opinions are based on, but it will not settle all arguments. Others will always have differing opinions, and some of those others will be social scientists who have conducted their own studies and drawn different conclusions.

Although Nie and Erbring (2000) concluded that the use of the Internet diminished social relations, their study at Stanford was soon followed by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (2001) and by others at the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Boase et al. 2006). These more recent studies also used survey research methods, but their findings suggested that the use of the Internet does not diminish social relations. Psychologist Robert Kraut’s early research suggested that Internet use was isolating, but his own more recent research indicates more positive effects (Kraut et al. 2002). To what extent do different conclusions result from differences in research methods, from different perspectives on similar findings, from rapid changes in the population of Internet users?

It’s not easy to answer such questions, so one research study often leads to another, and another, each one improving on previous research or examining a research question from a somewhat different angle. Part of becoming a good social researcher is learning that we have to evaluate critically each research study and weigh carefully the entire body of research about a research question before coming to a conclusion. And we have to keep an open mind about alternative interpretations and the possibility of new discoveries. The social phenomena we study are often complex, so we must consider this complexity when we choose methods to study social phenomena and when we interpret the results of these studies.

However, even in the areas of research that are fraught with controversy, where social scientists differ in their interpretations of the evidence, the quest for new and more sophisticated research has value. What is most important for improving understanding of the social world is not the result of any particular study but the accumulation of evidence from different studies of related issues. By designing new studies that focus on the weak points or controversial conclusions of prior research, social scientists contribute to a body of findings that gradually expands our knowledge about the social world and resolves some of the disagreements about it.

Whether you plan to conduct your own research projects, read others’ research reports, or just think about and act in the social world, knowing about research methods has many benefits. This knowledge will give you greater confidence in your own opinions; improve your ability to evaluate others’ opinions; and encourage you to refine your questions, answers, and methods of inquiry about the social world.

Conclusions

I hope this first chapter has given you an idea of what to expect from the rest of the book. My aim is to introduce you to social research methods by describing what social scientists have learned about the social world as well as how they have learned it. The substance of social science is inevitably more interesting than its methods, but the methods become more interesting when they’re linked to substantive investigations. I have focused attention in this chapter on research about social ties; in the subsequent chapters, I introduce research examples from other areas.
The eighth edition of *Investigating the Social World* is organized into four sections. The first section on Foundations for Social Research includes the introduction in Chapter 1, and then an overview of the research process in Chapter 2 and an introduction to issues in research ethics in Chapter 3. In Chapter 2, I review how social scientists select research questions for investigation, how they orient themselves to those questions with social theories, and how they review related prior research. Most of the chapter focuses on the steps involved in the overall research process and the criteria that researchers use to assess the quality of their answers to the original research questions. Several studies of domestic violence illustrate the research process in Chapter 2. Chapter 3, on research ethics, completes the foundation for our study of social research. I emphasize in this chapter and in the subsequent end-of-chapter exercises the importance of ethical treatment of human subjects in research. I also introduce in this chapter the process of writing research proposals, which I then continue in the end-of-chapter exercises throughout the book. In actual research projects, submission of a research proposal to an Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects is often the final step in laying the foundation for a research project.

The second section, Fundamentals of Social Research, presents methods for conceptualization and measurement, sampling, and causation and other elements of research design that must be considered in any social research project. In Chapter 4, I discuss the concepts we use to think about the social world and the measures we use to collect data about those concepts. This chapter begins with the example of research on student substance abuse, but you will find throughout this chapter a range of examples from contemporary research. In Chapter 5, I use research on homelessness to exemplify the issues involved in sampling cases to study. In Chapter 6, I use research on violence to illustrate how to design research to answer such causal research questions as “What causes violence?” I also explain in this chapter the decisions that social researchers must make about two research design issues that affect our ability to draw causal conclusions: (1) whether to use groups or individuals as units of analysis and (2) whether to use a cross-sectional or longitudinal research design.

The third section, Basic Social Research Designs, introduces the three primary methods of data collection and related methods of data analysis. Experimental studies, the subject of Chapter 7, focus attention on testing causal effects and are used often by social psychologists, psychologists, and policy evaluation researchers. Survey research is the most common method of data collection in sociology, so in Chapter 8, I describe the different types of surveys and explain how researchers design survey questions. I highlight in this chapter the ways in which the Internet and cell phones are changing the nature of survey research. The next chapter on quantitative data analysis introduces the statistics used to analyze data collected with experimental and survey designs. Chapter 9 is not a substitute for an entire course in statistics, but it provides the basic tools you can use to answer most research questions. To make this chapter realistic, I walk you through an analysis of quantitative data on voting in the 2008 presidential election. You can replicate this analysis with data on the book’s study site (if you have access to the SPSS statistical analysis program). You can also learn more about statistics with the SPSS exercises at the end of most chapters and with the study site’s tutorials.

Qualitative methods have long been the method of choice in anthropology, but they also have a long tradition in American sociology and have become the favored method of many social researchers around the world. Chapter 10 shows how qualitative techniques can uncover aspects of the social world that we are likely to miss in experiments and surveys and can sometimes result in a different perspective on social processes. Chapter 11 then focuses on the logic and procedures of analyzing qualitative data. In these chapters, you will learn about research on disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, on work organizations, on psychological distress, on gender roles, and on classroom behavior.

The fourth section, Advanced Social Research Designs, presents research designs that can involve combinations of one or more of the basic research designs. Evaluation research, the subject of Chapter 12, is conducted to identify the impact of social programs or to clarify social processes involving such programs. Evaluation research often uses experimental methods, but survey research and qualitative methods can also be helpful in evaluation research projects. Historical and comparative methods, the subject of Chapter 13, may involve either quantitative or qualitative methods that are used to compare societies and groups at one point in time and to analyze their development over time. We will see how these different approaches have been used
to learn about political change in transitional societies. I also explain the method of content analysis in this chapter; it can be used in historical and comparative research and provides another way to investigate social processes in an unobtrusive way. Chapter 14 reviews the methods of secondary data analysis and the related approach that has come to be known as “Big Data.” In this chapter, you will learn how to obtain previously collected data and to investigate important social issues such as poverty dynamics.

By the time you read Chapter 15, you should be convinced of the value of ways in which different methods can help us to understand different aspects of the social world. Chapter 15 takes this basic insight a few steps further by introducing the use of “mixed methods.” This increasingly popular approach to research design involves a careful plan for combining qualitative and quantitative methods in a research project.

Plan to read Chapter 16 carefully. Our research efforts are only as good as the attention given to our research reports, so my primary focus in this chapter is on writing research reports. I also present means for enhancing graphic displays to communicate quantitative results more effectively in research reports. In addition, I introduce meta-analysis—a statistical technique for assessing many research studies about a particular research question. By the end of the chapter, you should have a broader perspective on how research methods can improve understanding of the social world (as well as an appreciation for how much remains to be done).

Each chapter ends with several helpful learning tools. Lists of key terms and chapter highlights will help you review the ideas that have been discussed. Discussion questions and practice exercises will help you apply and deepen your knowledge. Special exercises guide you in developing your first research proposal, finding information on the Internet, grappling with ethical dilemmas, and conducting statistical analyses. A “careers and research” example may help you envision future job possibilities.

The study site for this book on the SAGE website provides interactive exercises and quizzes for reviewing key concepts, as well as research articles to review, websites to visit, data to analyze, and short lectures to hear. Check it out at edge.sagepub.com/schutt8e.

### Key Terms

| Applied research | 22 | Hermeneutic circle | 20 | Pseudoscience | 12 |
| Basic science | 21 | Illogical reasoning | 10 | Qualitative methods | 19 |
| Constructivism | 20 | Inaccurate observation | 8 | Quantitative methods | 18 |
| Descriptive research | 14 | Interpretivism | 20 | Resistance to change | 10 |
| Evaluation research | 16 | Intersubjective agreement | 20 | Science | 11 |
| Explanatory research | 16 | Overgeneralization | 8 | Selective observation | 8 |
| Exploratory research | 15 | Positivism | 19 | Social science | 12 |
| Feminist research | 20 | Postpositivism | 20 | Triangulation | 19 |

### Highlights

- Social research differs from the ordinary process of thinking about our experiences by focusing on broader questions that involve people outside our immediate experience and issues about why things happen, and by using systematic research methods to answer those questions. Four common errors in reasoning are (1) selective or inaccurate observation, (2) overgeneralization, (3) illogical reasoning, and (4) resistance to change. These errors result from the complexity of the social world, subjective processes that affect the reasoning of researchers and those they study, researchers’ self-interestedness, and unquestioning acceptance of tradition or of those in positions of authority.
• Social science is the use of logical, systematic, documented methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes, as well as the knowledge produced by these investigations.
• Social research cannot resolve value questions or provide permanent, universally accepted answers.
• Social research can be motivated by policy guidance and program management needs, academic concerns, and personal or charitable impulses.
• Social research can be descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative—or some combination of these.
• Quantitative and qualitative methods structure research in different ways and are differentially appropriate for diverse research situations. They may be combined in research projects.
• Positivism and postpositivism are research philosophies that emphasize the goal of understanding the real world; these philosophies guide most quantitative researchers.

• The constructivist paradigm emphasizes the importance of exploring and representing the ways in which different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs. Constructivists interact with research subjects to develop a shared perspective on the issue being studied. Interpretivism is a related research philosophy that emphasizes an understanding of the meaning people attach to their experiences; it guides many qualitative researchers.
• Feminist researchers often emphasize interpretivist and constructivist perspectives in research and urge a concern with underprivileged groups.
• Basic science research focuses on expanding knowledge and providing results to other researchers. Applied research seeks to have an impact on social practice and to share results with a wide audience.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

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Discussion Questions

1. Select a social issue that interests you, such as Internet use or crime. List at least four of your beliefs about this phenomenon. Try to identify the sources of each of these beliefs.

2. Does the academic motivation to do the best possible job of understanding how the social world works conflict with policy or personal motivations? How could personal experiences with social isolation or with Internet use shape research motivations? In what ways might the goal of influencing policy about social relations shape a researcher’s approach to this issue?

3. Pick a contemporary social issue of interest to you. Describe different approaches to research on this issue that would involve descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and evaluative approaches.

4. Review each of the research alternatives. Do you find yourself more attracted to a quantitative or a qualitative approach? Or to doing research to contribute to basic knowledge or shape social policy? What is the basis of your preferences? Would you prefer to take a mixed-methods approach? What research questions do you think are most important to pursue to improve government policies?

5. Do you favor the positivist/postpositivist or the interpretivist/constructivist philosophy as a guide for social research? Review the related guidelines for research and explain your position.
Practice Exercises

1. Read the abstracts (initial summaries) of five articles available in the “article review matrix” on the study site. On the basis of the abstract only, classify each research project represented in the articles as primarily descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative. Note any indications that the research focused on other types of research questions.

2. Find a report of social science research in an article in a daily newspaper. What are the motives for the research? How much information is provided about the research design? What were the major findings? What additional evidence would you like to see in the article to increase your findings in the research conclusions?

3. Review “Types of Research” from the Interactive Exercises link on the study site. To use these lessons, choose one of the four “Types of Research” exercises from the opening menu. About 10 questions are presented in each version of the lesson. After reading each question, choose one answer from the list presented. The program will evaluate your answers. If an answer is correct, the program will explain why you were right and go on to the next question. If you have made an error, the program will explain the error to you and give you another chance to respond.

4. Now, select a journal article from edge.sagepub.com/schutt8e and read its abstract. Identify the type of research (descriptive, exploratory, or evaluative) that appeared to be used. Now scan the article and decide whether the approach was quantitative or qualitative (or both) and whether it included any discussion of policy implications.

Ethics Questions

Throughout the book, we will discuss the ethical challenges that arise in social research. At the end of each chapter, you are asked to consider some questions about ethical issues related to that chapter’s focus. I introduce this critical topic formally in Chapter 3, but we will begin here with some questions for you to ponder.

1. The chapter refers to research on social isolation. What would you do if you were interviewing elderly persons in the community and found that one was very isolated and depressed or even suicidal, apparently as a result of his or her isolation? Do you believe that social researchers have an obligation to take action in a situation like this? What if you discovered a similar problem with a child? What guidelines would you suggest for researchers?

2. Would you encourage social researchers to announce their findings in press conferences about topics such as the impact of the Internet on social ties, and to encourage relevant agencies to adopt policies aimed to lessen social isolation? Are there any advantages to studying research questions only to contribute to academic knowledge? Do you think there is a fundamental conflict between academic and policy motivations? Do social researchers have an ethical obligation to recommend policies that their research suggests would help other people?

Web Exercises

1. The research on social ties by McPherson and his colleagues was publicized in a Washington Post article that also included comments by other sociologists. Read the article at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/22/AR2006062201763_pf.html and continue the commentary. Do your own experiences suggest that there is a problem with social ties in your community? Does it seem, as Wellman suggests in the Washington Post article, that a larger number of social ties can make up for the decline in intimate social ties that McPherson found?

2. Scan one of the publications about the Internet and society at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society website, http://cyber.law.harvard.edu. Describe one of the projects discussed: its goals, methods, and major findings. What do the researchers conclude about the impact of the Internet on...
social life in the United States? Next, repeat this process with a report from the Pew Internet Project at www.pewinternet.org, or with the Digital Future report from the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future site, www.digitalcenter.org. What aspects of the methods, questions, or findings might explain differences in their conclusions? Do you think the researchers approached their studies with different perspectives at the outset? If so, what might these perspectives have been?

**Video Interview Questions**

Listen to the researcher interview for Chapter 1 at edge.sagepub.com/schutt8e.

1. What are the benefits to breaking down questions in a text-based interview structure?

2. As Janet Salmons mentions, one can enhance his or her research by deciding carefully on the various kinds of technology to be used. What are some the considerations Salmons mentions in deciding whether to use text-based interviews or video conference calls?

**SPSS Exercises**

The SPSS Exercises at the end of each chapter focus on support for the death penalty. A portion of the 2012 GSS survey data is available on the study site. You will need this portion of the 2012 GSS to carry out these exercises. If you are able to use the complete version of SPSS (perhaps in your university’s computer lab), download the GSS2012x file. If you are using the student version of SPSS (purchased with this text), download the GSS2012a file. You will begin your empirical investigation by thinking a bit about the topic and the data you have available for study.

1. What personal motivation might you have for studying support for the death penalty? What might motivate other people to conduct research on this topic? What policy and academic motives might be important?

2. After you download the GSS2012x or GSS2012a file and save it in a directory, open the GSS2012x or GSS2012a file containing the 2012 GSS data. In the SPSS menu, click on File, then on Open and Data, and then on the name of the data file in the directory where it is saved. How many respondents are there in this subset of the complete GSS file? (Scroll down to the bottom of the data set.) How many variables were measured? (Scroll down to the bottom of the Variable View in SPSS v. 21.)

3. What would you estimate as the level of support for capital punishment in the United States in 2012? Now for your first real research experience in this text: Describe the distribution of support for capital punishment. Obtaining the relevant data is as simple as “a, b, c, d, e.”

   a. Click on Graphs.
   b. Click on Legacy Dialogs > Bar.
   c. Select “Simple” and “Summaries for groups of cases” under Data in Chart Area > Define.
   d. Place the CAPPUN variable in the box below “Category Axis:” and select “% of cases” under “Bar Represent.”
   e. Click OK.

Now describe the distribution of support for capital punishment. What percentage of the population supported capital punishment in the United States in 2012?
Developing a Research Proposal

Will you develop a research proposal in this course? If so, you should begin to consider your alternatives.

1. What topic would you focus on, if you could design a social research project without any concern for costs? What are your motives for studying this topic?

2. Develop four questions that you might investigate about the topic you just selected. Each question should reflect a different research motive: description, exploration, explanation, or evaluation. Be specific.

3. Which question most interests you? Would you prefer to attempt to answer that question with quantitative or qualitative methods? Do you seek to contribute to basic science or to applied research?