Chapter 3

THEORIES AND PHILOSOPHIES FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

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The numbers are staggering. Since 1950, the processing power of computers has increased by a factor of 10 billion, and the size of the individual transistors within them has decreased by a factor of about 7 million (Kaku, 1997:28). And this power is being put to use, as about 533 million Internet users communicate worldwide—149 million in the United States alone (Netcraft, 2002). As a result, trade between nations, migration between continents, communication among family and friends, and even methods of college teaching are being transformed. You will learn in this book that these technological innovations are also changing the practice of social research, through such techniques as Web-based surveys, computer-aided textual analysis, and massive computer-accessible data archives.
I begin this chapter, however, not with the future of social research, but with its past. I locate the origins of modern social science in an earlier period of rapid technological and social change and review the major social theories that emerged from this change. I then demonstrate how these theories provide a foundation for investigating the social world. I will also connect these theories to alternative philosophies about investigating the social world.

You can think of this as the “big picture” chapter. It’s here that you’ll see how research becomes much more valuable when we connect it to social theory. It’s also here that you’ll learn that researchers’ preferences for quantitative or qualitative methodologies can reflect different philosophies about what social reality is. In the chapter’s last section, I’ll ask you to consider two other aspects of the big picture: How social processes can vary between social contexts and be affected by the natural world. You’ll find that these are good points to keep in mind when you review or design any social investigation.

THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sociology was first conceived as a distinct social science during the Industrial Revolution in Europe. This period of technological innovation and social change exceeded in scope the changes that have occurred so far with our current information technology revolution. Between 1781 and 1802 in England, imports of raw cotton climbed from 5 million to 60 million pounds as a result of new technologies. Coal production grew ten-fold in just 40 years, and pig iron production doubled, from 68,000 tons (in 1788) to 1,347,000 tons (in 1839) (Heilbroner, 1970:74–75). New power-driven machines made one weaver 20 times more productive and one spinning machine 200 times more productive (Laslett, 1973).

The social world was dislocated, rearranged, and reconsidered. Millions of peasants displaced by changes in agricultural technology began to work in the rapidly expanding factories (Laslett, 1973). The English population increased four-fold during the 19th century, and its gross national product (GNP) soared fourteen-fold (Laslett, 1973). In 40 years, Manchester, England, grew from being “a mere village” to an industrial city with a hundred cotton mills and many other factories (Heilbroner, 1970:75). The certainties of village life and its traditions were replaced by the experience of social disruption and the expectation of social change.

Sociologists often describe this social transformation as a shift in the basis of social organization from community, in which people knew each other intimately, to society, in which people knew many others only through business relations or other specialized social roles. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies called this a shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*.

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**Gemeinschaft societies**  Societies, based on community, that are homogeneous, with social relations based on kinship and, often, a common religion.

**Gesellschaft societies**  Societies, based on association, that are individualistic and competitive, with a developed division of labor.

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This pulling apart of the individual from the community and the resulting exposure to a broader range of people and social arrangements highlighted the importance of social bonds and the value of understanding their impact. Because the natural sciences had made such
great strides in understanding and controlling the natural world, it seemed possible that a 
social science could now do the same with respect to the social world.

**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE**

Although the early social scientists shared a focus on the impact of societal change, they came 
to understand this impact in quite different ways (Collins, 1994). French sociologist Emile 
Durkheim, a functionalist, believed that new forms of solidarity could replace weakened 
traditional bonds. In contrast, German economist Karl Marx, a conflict theorist, argued that 
conflicts between social classes would become increasingly severe. English economist 
Adam Smith proclaimed that the new economic order would free individuals to achieve their 
own goals—to make rational choices. Some of the early American sociologists, known as 
symbolic interactionists, focused attention on how individuals make sense of the social 
interaction in which they participate.

What questions are important to ask about the social world? What concepts should we 
consider and which variables should we measure? What hypotheses are important for under-
standing society, and which are merely trivial pursuits?

We use social theory to answer questions like these and thus to stimulate our investiga-
tions. You have already seen the value of social theory in guiding the Sherman and Berk 
research on domestic violence (Chapter 2). Here, I will review the four general theoretical 
perspectives I have just introduced and give some examples of more specific theories and 
related research.

**Functionalism**

What were the consequences of weakening social bonds? Emile Durkheim (1966) exam-
ined variation in suicide across France and found that provinces with higher suicide rates were 
more likely to be Protestant than Catholic, to be urban than rural, and to have lower marital 
rates. Each of these suicide-prone characteristics indicated greater movement toward a more 
modern, less traditional society characterized by weaker social bonds.

Was there anything that could replace the power of traditional social bonds in a modern 
society? In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (1984) argued that traditional social 
bonds were based on likeness—on similarity of background and outlook between people; he 
termed this *mechanical solidarity*. This form of solidarity was weakened in modern society 
by the growing division of labor, which distinguished people in many different roles. But 
Durkheim suggested that it was precisely the division of labor that created a new form of 
social solidarity that would maintain the strength of social bonds. He termed this other 
form *organic solidarity*, and explained it as the product of interdependence between people 
who perform different work roles but need each other in order for the society or work orga-
nization as a whole to function. Differentiation creates interdependence and so strengthens 
social bonds.

We could also say that organic solidarity served the *function* of bonding together people 
in a society that has a developed division of labor, hence the term *functionalism*. Although 
Durkheim was concerned about weakened social bonds in modern society, his functionalist 
theory explained how society would restore these bonds. From this perspective, there was no
fundamental conflict between the interests of the individual and the interests of society, or among different social groups—they fit together as part of an organic whole.

**Functionalism**  A social theory that explains social patterns in terms of their consequences for society as a whole and emphasizes the interdependence of social institutions and their common interest in maintaining the social order.

You can see in this synopsis some of the key concepts in Durkheim’s theory: division of labor, forms of solidarity, strength of social bonds, propensity to commit suicide, and societal functions. Perhaps you can also deduce propositions that would link these concepts and form the basis for testable Durkheimian hypotheses. The causal model in Exhibit 3.1 charts the relationships among five concepts according to Durkheim’s predictions (Blalock, 1969:19). The number of associates of individuals (population density) results in an increase in the division of labor, which in turn increases the level of solidarity, which in turn increases social consensus and decreases the rejection of deviants (Zetterberg, 1965:159–160).

Do these concepts interest you? Do the propositions strike you as reasonable? If so, you might join a long list of researchers who have attempted to test, extend, and modify various aspects of Durkheim’s functionalist theory.

In one example, Robert J. Sampson, Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Felton Earls (1999) focused on social bonds in a study of neighborhoods and child development. They investigated whether the amount of interaction between children and neighborhood adults differed for children of different racial groups. As you can see in Exhibit 3.2, black children were particularly disadvantaged in this respect. Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls (1999) concluded that these children were more socially vulnerable and experienced less effective social control in their neighborhoods than did children in other neighborhoods.
Conflict Theory

The most direct way to introduce Karl Marx’s conflict theory is with these famous lines from his and Friedrich Engels’s (1961:13–16) Communist Manifesto:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. . . . Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat. . . . The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.

There you have it. For Marx and Engels, social classes were the key groupings in society and conflict between them was not only the norm, but also the “engine” of social change. But of course there was much more to it than this. Marx’s conflict theory was materialist—it presumed that social change could be explained in terms of the material conditions in society,
most importantly the level of technology. In a similar vein, it treated the economic system of a society as its primary structure, and the educational, political, religious, and cultural institutions as the “superstructure” that helped to acclimate people to economic conditions. Thus, the economic system was the “independent variable” that shaped ideas and other social processes.

Conflict theory

Identifies conflict between social groups as the primary force in society; understanding the bases and consequences of conflict is the key to understanding social processes.

Max Weber, another “classical” German sociologist, can also be considered a conflict theorist, but his version of conflict theory was very different from that of Marx and Engels. In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explained that the rise of the capitalist economic system was due in part to the Protestant Reformation and the ideas associated with it: “unremitting labor was . . . the way of life ordained by God in which every man must prove himself” (Bendix, 1962:62). For Max Weber, then, ideas were the “independent variable” that shaped the economic system.

Weber and Marx also differed in their concept of social stratification. Marx considered economic class to be the primary basis of social stratification, but Weber identified social status and political power as equally important stratification dimensions.

Do conflict theory’s concepts strike a responsive chord with you? Can you think of instances when conflict theory propositions might help to explain social change? *Global Inequalities*, by York W. Bradshaw and Michael Wallace (1996) is an example of research motivated by conflict theory. Bradshaw and Wallace present data on corporate sales and national gross domestic products that show the great economic power of multinational corporations relative to countries in less-developed areas of the world. (see Exhibit 3.3).

Rational Choice

Rational choice theory also has its roots in the Industrial Revolution. In *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776, English economist Adam Smith argued that in a capitalist system, rational individual action results in a larger social good:

. . . he intends only his own gain, . . . led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. (Smith, 1937:423)

Rational choice theorists in sociology, like those in economics, explain individual behavior in terms of rational cost/benefit calculations: “the actor chooses the action which will maximize utility” (Coleman, 1990:14). Why do people choose the schools they do? Because the expected value of attending exceeds the cost of doing so. Why do people work rather than only pursue leisure activities? Because the rewards exceed the costs. You get the idea.
If you would like to try your hand at investigating predictions of rational choice theory, a good example to review is the research by Michael R. Gottfredson and Don M. Gottfredson (1988:25) on responses to crime. Exhibit 3.4 presents one piece of their evidence for the value of rational choice theory: the difference in likelihood of reporting thefts to the police varies dramatically depending on whether the victim had theft insurance. The rational calculation is apparently that if reporting a theft doesn’t result in financial benefit, it isn’t worth the bother.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Several early American sociologists attempted to understand social bonds by looking inward, at the meaning people attach to their interactions, rather than outward to larger

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**Exhibit 3.3** The Fifty Richest Economic Entities in the World*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. China</td>
<td>$506,075</td>
<td>25. SAMSUNG</td>
<td>$51,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. India</td>
<td>$214,598</td>
<td>27. IRI</td>
<td>$50,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. GENERAL MOTORS</td>
<td>$133,622</td>
<td>28. SIEMENS</td>
<td>$50,381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Indonesia</td>
<td>$126,364</td>
<td>29. Colombia</td>
<td>$48,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Thailand</td>
<td>$110,337</td>
<td>30. VOLKSWAGEN</td>
<td>$46,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Iran, Islamic Rep.</td>
<td>$110,258</td>
<td>31. CHRYSLER</td>
<td>$43,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. FORD MOTOR</td>
<td>$108,521</td>
<td>32. Pakistan</td>
<td>$41,904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Turkey</td>
<td>$99,696</td>
<td>33. UNILEVER</td>
<td>$41,843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. EXXON</td>
<td>$97,825</td>
<td>34. Chile</td>
<td>$41,203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ROYAL DUTCH/ SHELL GROUP</td>
<td>$95,134</td>
<td>35. NESTLE</td>
<td>$38,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Ukraine</td>
<td>$94,831</td>
<td>36. Myanmar</td>
<td>$37,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. TOYOTA MOTOR</td>
<td>$85,283</td>
<td>37. ELF AQUITAINE</td>
<td>$37,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Poland</td>
<td>$83,823</td>
<td>38. HONDA MOTOR</td>
<td>$35,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. HITACHI</td>
<td>$68,581</td>
<td>39. Algeria</td>
<td>$35,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MACHINES</td>
<td>$62,716</td>
<td>40. ENI</td>
<td>$34,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. MATSUSHITA ELECTRIC IND.</td>
<td>$61,385</td>
<td>41. FIAT</td>
<td>$34,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. GENERAL ELECTRIC</td>
<td>$60,823</td>
<td>42. SONY</td>
<td>$34,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. DAIMLER-BENZ</td>
<td>$59,102</td>
<td>43. TEXACO</td>
<td>$34,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Malaysia</td>
<td>$57,568</td>
<td>44. Egypt, Arab Republic</td>
<td>$33,553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. MOBIL</td>
<td>$56,576</td>
<td>45. NEC</td>
<td>$33,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. NISSAN MOTOR</td>
<td>$53,760</td>
<td>46. E.I. DU PONT DE NEM</td>
<td>$32,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. BRITISH PETROLEUM</td>
<td>$52,485</td>
<td>47. CHEVRON</td>
<td>$32,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Philippines</td>
<td>$52,462</td>
<td>48. PHILLIPS ELECTRONICS</td>
<td>$31,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Proctor &amp; Gamble</td>
<td>$32,433</td>
<td>49. DAEWOO</td>
<td>$30,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Philips</td>
<td>$32,412</td>
<td>50. PHILLPS ELECTRONICS</td>
<td>$30,433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excludes the richest countries.

social structures. They focused on the symbolic nature of social interaction—how social interaction conveys meaning and promotes socialization. For example, Charles Horton Cooley (1962) argued that the self cannot be understood as something apart from interaction with others:

In general, then, most of our reflective consciousness, of our wide-awake state of mind, is social consciousness . . . self and society are twin-born, we know one as immediately as we know the other, and the notion of a separate and independent ego is an illusion. (Cooley, 1962:5)

George Herbert Mead (1934), another early American sociologist, also focused on the impact of others on the development of the self. Mead (1934:158) believed that the self is only fully developed when it becomes "an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and the others are all involved." Geoffrey R. Skoll’s (1992:136–137) ethnographic study of a drug abuse treatment facility conveys the flavor of work guided by **symbolic interaction theory**:

An unstated, but important, goal of the program is to domesticate the female residents. Treatment plans for women are always directed toward making them “good homemakers” and mothers. . . . While the rule against sexual or romantic conduct applies equally to men and women, the essence of women’s sexuality is treated and constructed differently. (Skoll, 1992:136, 137)

Do you find yourself thinking of interesting new research questions when you read about Skoll’s study? If so, you should consider developing your knowledge of the concepts of symbolic interaction theory.

**Symbolic interaction theory** focuses on the symbolic nature of social interaction—how social interaction conveys meaning and promotes socialization.

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**Exhibit 3.4** Robbery Victimizations Reported and Not Reported to the Police, by Insurance Coverage, United States, 1973–1977

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theft insurance</th>
<th>Reported to police</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1,163,564)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(53,705)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*a Excludes victims who responded “Don’t know” to the question, “Was there any insurance against theft?”

*b Includes victims who responded “No” and “Don’t know” to the question, “Were the police informed of this incident in any way?”
Using Social Theory

Are you ready to choose one of these general theoretical perspectives to guide your research? I suspect not. For now, think of the four theoretical perspectives as tour guides waiting to help you explore a new city. A tour guide gives us an overview of a city and how it operates, points out key landmarks, and suggests where to go for particular types of experiences. But different tour guides will give very different impressions of the same city. The functionalist tour guide points out that in each city neighborhood, from classy Swanktown to shabby Roadside, children go to school, employees go to work, congregants go to church, and the newspapers get delivered. The different parts of the city function together to create the larger whole.

But the conflict tour guide will emphasize social differences: We will see the neighborhoods of the rich and then the ghettos and barrios of the poor. We may stop along the way to visit striking workers outside a factory and then have lunch in a corporate boardroom. We will be impressed by the many bases of conflict between social groups.

The rational choice tour will be a bit more down to earth, but also somewhat repetitious. At every stop we will see transactions in process. We may spend a “day in the life” of a community member who hunts for bargains in shops, decides whether to send her son to a private or public school, calculates the potential benefits from electing a politician who campaigns on a “no new taxes” pledge, and evaluates the tradeoffs between asking for a promotion and seeking a new job.

It is the hardier tourists who will appreciate the symbolic interactionist guide. He will ignore the usual landmarks, make no special effort to show us contrasting neighborhoods, and skip the tourist shops. Instead, the interactionist will have us hang around a street corner with local gang members, sit in the back and listen to the gossip at a PTA meeting, and question local residents at a coffee shop. There will be no fixed itinerary; we will go where things look interesting and appreciate what people say. At the end of the day, our tour guide assures us, we will understand the city by seeing it and hearing about it through the eyes and ears of its residents.

Would you like to sign up for more than one tour? If so, do you think you will end up wondering whether you are in the same city when you tour with different guides? Or do you expect to marvel at the greater understanding that emerges from multiple tours? Do you regret that there isn’t one guide who can show you what the city is “really” like?

That’s the state of social theory in the early years of the 21st century: general theoretical perspectives that provide alternative frames of reference and encourage us to pose different questions about the social world, but no single approach around which most social scientists have rallied. As a social researcher, you may work within one of these perspectives, seeking to extend it, challenge it, or specify it. You may test alternative implications of the different theoretical perspectives against each other. If you’re really feeling ambitious, you may even seek to combine some aspects of the different perspectives. Maybe you’ll come up with a different theoretical perspective altogether.

The Relationship Between Research and Theory

If you are like most social scientists, you will focus your attention on a specific theory derived from one of these four perspectives, develop some testable hypotheses, and get on
with your research. You have seen how Sherman and Berk (1984) deduced from deterrence theory the hypothesis that arrest would lower the risk of recidivism among people accused of domestic violence and then found some support for that hypothesis. They noted that deterrence theory reflects the rational choice theoretical perspective, but the evidence they found for their hypothesis in itself provided only a little bit more evidence for rational choice theory.

We may feel some greater affinity for one perspective rather than another—appreciate the view provided by its “tour”—but our primary concern in everyday research is likely to be what Robert Merton (1954) called “middle-range theories.” You’ve just seen how middle-range theories like those of Sampson and colleagues (1999) on neighborhood social bonds, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1988) on responses to crime, and Skoll (1992) on social roles in drug treatment facilities can stimulate fascinating research.

Social theory and research findings always influence one another. You now know the primary form that this relationship takes: the testing of specific hypotheses deduced from a theory, with the goal of evaluating the empirical support for the theory’s implications. But research can shape the development of theory in more subtle ways, as when unanticipated findings stimulate a search for alternatives to current theory (Merton, 1957:102–117).

**Paradigm Change**

The process of testing specific hypotheses deduced from a theory adds gradually to the body of scientific knowledge and represents the nuts and bolts of science. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn (1970) called this gradual, incremental work of most scientists “normal science.” Research like this operates within a general theoretical perspective, which Kuhn termed a scientific paradigm, and does not challenge the basic assumptions of that perspective. Scientists operating within a particular scientific paradigm share a host of major concepts and specific theories, research findings, and presuppositions about the world. The dominant scientific paradigm at any point in time represents the prevailing wisdom in that field—its entire body of knowledge.

The dominant scientific paradigm can change, but only after a large body of contrary evidence accumulates and an alternative perspective appears. This isn’t just a matter of one more study that fails to support deterrence theory; instead, it is something like Copernicus’s heliocentric view of the solar system replacing the previous prevailing presumption that the earth was the center of the solar system. It took more than 100 years for this paradigm shift to occur, but once it did it completely changed prevailing beliefs. Kuhn termed such an abrupt transition from one theoretical paradigm to another a scientific revolution. Such revolutions are uncommon, but when they occur they affect many areas of research. Even established scientists begin to accept the new way of thinking.

**Scientific paradigm** A set of beliefs that guide scientific work in an area, including unquestioned presuppositions, accepted theories, and exemplary research findings.

*Examples:* Structural-functional theory; Marxism; Freudian theory.

Have we had any scientific revolutions in sociology or the other social sciences? Not really, because we have had no single widely accepted paradigm that could be overturned by
an alternative. But we can think of the four broad theoretical perspectives in this chapter as alternative paradigms that have different implications for how we think about the social world. And when you find yourself feeling very confident about current beliefs about the social world, remember Kuhn’s concept of paradigm shifts. Ask yourself whether there is some basis for challenging current beliefs. Consider whether recent research suggests a new theoretical direction.

SOCIAL RESEARCH PHILOSOPHIES

When you set out to investigate the social world, a theoretical perspective will help steer you toward appropriate research questions, hypotheses, and literature. It will help you chart a route that takes you to the places you need to visit. But your investigation also will be shaped by your assumptions about how the social world can best be investigated—by your social research philosophy.

The early social scientists shared with natural scientists a positivist research philosophy—a belief that there is a reality that is external to us that we can understand through empirical research. But all the empirical data we collect comes to us through our own senses and must be interpreted with our own minds. To some philosophers, this suggests that we can never be sure that we have understood reality properly, or that we ever can, or that our own understandings can really be judged more valid than someone else’s. Concerns like this have begun to appear in many areas of social science and have begun to shape some research methods. In this section, we will focus on two general alternative research philosophies and examine some of their implications for research methods. We will review research guidelines and objectives that are consistent with both philosophies.

Positivism and Postpositivism

A researcher’s philosophical perspective on reality and on the appropriate role of the researcher will also shape her methodological preferences. Researchers with a positivist philosophy believe that there is an objective reality that exists apart from the perceptions of those who observe it, and that the goal of science is to better understand this reality.

Whatever nature “really” is, we assume that it presents itself in precisely the same way to the same human observer standing at different points in time and space. . . . We assume that it also presents itself in precisely the same way across different human observers standing at the same point in time and space. (Wallace, 1983:461)

This philosophy lies behind the research circle (Chapter 2), with its assumption that we can test theoretically based predictions with data collected from the real, objective world. It is the philosophy traditionally associated with science (Weber, 1949:72), with the expectation that there are universal laws of human behavior, and with the belief that scientists must be objective and unbiased in order to see reality clearly. Positivists believe that a well-designed test of a theoretically based hypothesis—like the test of the prediction that arrest will reduce domestic violence—can move us closer to understanding actual social processes.
**Postpositivism** is a philosophy of reality that is closely related to positivism. Postpositivists believe that there is an external, objective reality, but they are very sensitive to the complexity of this reality and to the limitations and biases of the scientists who study it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:109–111). As a result, they do not think we can ever be sure that scientific methods allow us to perceive objective reality. Instead, postpositivists believe that the goal of science is to achieve *intersubjective agreement* among scientists about the nature of reality (Wallace, 1983:461).

For example, postpositivists may worry that researchers’ predispositions bias them in favor of deterrence theory. Therefore, they remain skeptical of research results that support deterrence theory until a number of researchers report such evidence. A postpositivist has much more confidence in the community of social researchers than in any individual social scientist (Campbell & Russo, 1999:144).

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**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** The belief that there is an empirical reality, but that our understanding of it is limited by its complexity and by the biases and other limitations of researchers.

**Intersubjective agreement** An agreement by different observers on what is happening in the natural or social world.

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**Positivist Research Guidelines**

In order to achieve an accurate, or valid, understanding of the social world, the researcher operating within the positivist or postpositivist tradition must adhere to some basic guidelines about how to conduct research:

1. *Test ideas against empirical reality without becoming too personally invested in a particular outcome.* This guideline requires a commitment to “testing,” as opposed to just reacting to events as they happen or looking for what we want to see (Kincaid, 1996:51–54).

2. *Plan and carry out investigations systematically.* Social researchers have little hope of conducting a careful test of their ideas if they do not think through in advance how they should go about the test and then proceed accordingly. But a systematic approach is not always easy. For example, Sherman and Berk (1984) needed to ensure that spouse abusers were assigned to be arrested or not on a random basis rather than on the basis of the police officers’ personal preferences. They devised a systematic procedure using different color report sheets, in random order, but then found that police officers sometimes deviated from this procedure due to their feelings about particular cases. Subsequently, in some replications of the study, the researchers ensured compliance with their research procedures by requiring police officers to call in to a central number to receive the experimentally determined treatment.

3. *Document all procedures and disclose them publicly.* Social researchers should disclose the methods on which their conclusions are based so that others can evaluate for
themselves the likely soundness of these conclusions. Such disclosure is a key feature of science. It is the community of researchers, reacting to each others’ work, that provides the best guarantee against purely self-interested conclusions (Kincaid, 1996). Sherman and Berk (1984) provide a compelling example. After describing the formal research plan in their research report, they discuss the apparent “slippage” from this plan when some police officers avoided implementing the random assignment procedure.

4. **Clarify assumptions.** No investigation is complete unto itself; whatever the researcher’s method, the research rests on some background assumptions. For example, research to determine whether arrest has a deterrent effect assumes that potential law violators think rationally, and that they calculate potential costs and benefits prior to committing crimes. When a researcher conducts an election poll, the assumption is that people actually vote for the candidate they say they will vote for. By definition, research assumptions are not tested, so we do not know for sure whether they are correct. By taking the time to think about and disclose their assumptions, researchers provide important information for those who seek to evaluate the validity of research conclusions.

5. **Specify the meaning of all terms.** Words often have multiple or unclear meanings. “Alienation,” “depression,” “cold,” “crowded,” and so on can mean different things to different people. In scientific research, all terms must be defined explicitly and used consistently. For example, Sherman and Berk (1984) identified their focus as misdemeanor domestic assault, not just “wife beating.” They specified that their work concerned those cases of spouse assault in which severe injury was not involved and both partners were present when police arrived.

6. **Maintain a skeptical stance toward current knowledge.** The results of any particular investigation must be examined critically, although confidence about interpretations of the social or natural world increases after repeated investigations yield similar results. A general skepticism about current knowledge stimulates researchers to improve the validity of current research results and expand the frontier of knowledge. For example, in response to questions raised about the Sherman and Berk study, Lawrence Sherman and Ellen Cohn (1989) pointed out 13 problems in the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment and weighed carefully the extent to which these problems might have undermined the experiment’s validity.

7. **Replicate research and build social theory.** No one study is definitive by itself. We can’t fully understand a single study’s results apart from the larger body of knowledge to which it is related, and we can’t place much confidence in these results until the study has been replicated. Theories organize the knowledge accumulated by numerous investigations into a coherent whole and serve as a guide to future inquiries. Sherman and his colleagues (1992) recognized this as they developed their plans on the basis of prior research and theory and when they called for replications of their research.

8. **Search for regularities or patterns.** Positivist and postpositivist scientists assume that the natural world has some underlying order of relationships, so that unique events and individuals can be understood at least in part in terms of general principles (Grinnell, 1992:27–29). Sherman (1992:162–164), for example, described the abuse histories of...
two men to provide greater insight into why arrest could have different effects for different people. The goal is to understand social patterns that characterize many individuals, not just to understand individual cases.

Real investigations by social scientists do not always include much attention to theory, specific definitions of all terms, and so forth. But it behooves any social researcher to study these guidelines and to consider the consequences of not following any with which they do not agree.

**A Positivist Research Goal: Advancing Knowledge**

The goal of the traditional positivist scientific approach is to advance scientific knowledge. This goal is achieved when research results are published in academic journals or presented at academic conferences.

The positivist approach considers 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, because they are viewed as a legitimate basis for selecting a research problem to investigate. In addition, many scientists also consider it acceptable to encourage government officials or private organizations to act on the basis of a study’s findings, after the research is over. During a research project, however, value considerations are to be held in abeyance.

**Interpretivism and Constructivism**

Qualitative research is often guided by a different, interpretivist philosophy. Interpretive 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 interpretations. This philosophy rejects the positivist belief that there is a concrete, objective reality that scientific methods help us to understand (Lynch & Bogen, 1997); instead, interpretivists believe that scientists construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others. From this standpoint, the goal of validity becomes misleading: “Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time” (Schwandt, 1994:128).

Searching for universally applicable social laws can distract from learning what people know and how they understand their lives. The interpretive social researcher examines meanings that have been socially constructed. . . . There is not one reality out there to be measured; 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)
The constructivist paradigm extends interpretivist philosophy by emphasizing the importance of exploring how different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:44–45). It gives particular attention to the different goals of researchers and other participants in a research setting and seeks to develop a consensus among participants about how to understand the focus of inquiry. The constructivist research report will highlight different views of the social program or other issue and explain how a consensus can be reached among participants.

Interpretivism  The belief that reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to that reality. Max Weber termed the goal of interpretivist research *verstehen*, or “understanding.”

Constructivist paradigm  A perspective that emphasizes how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs.

Constructivist inquiry uses an interactive research process, in which a researcher begins an evaluation in some social setting by identifying the different interest groups in that setting. The researcher goes on to learn what each group thinks, and then gradually tries to develop a shared perspective on the problem being evaluated (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:42).

These steps are diagrammed as a circular process in Exhibit 3.5. In this process, called a hermeneutic circle,

the constructions of a variety of individuals—deliberately chosen so as to uncover widely variable viewpoints—are elicited, challenged, and exposed to new information and new, more sophisticated ways of interpretation, until some level of consensus is reached (although there may be more than one focus for consensus). (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:180–181)

The researcher conducts an open-ended interview with the first respondent (R₁) to learn about her thoughts and feelings on the subject of inquiry—her “construction” (C₁). The researcher then asks this respondent to nominate a second respondent (R₂), who feels very differently. The second respondent is then interviewed in the same way, but also is asked to comment on the themes raised by the previous respondent. The process continues until all major perspectives are represented, and then may be repeated again with the same set of respondents.

The final product is a “case report.”

A case report is very unlike the technical reports we are accustomed to seeing in positivist inquiries. It is not a depiction of a “true” or “real” state of affairs. . . . It does not culminate in judgments, conclusions, or recommendations except insofar as these are concurred on by relevant respondents.

The case report helps the reader come to a realization (in the sense of making real) not only of the states of affairs that are believed by constructors [research respondents] to exist but also of the underlying motives, feelings, and rationales leading to those beliefs. The
case report is characterized by a thick description that not only clarifies the all-important context, but that makes it possible for the reader vicariously to experience it. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:180–181)

**Interpretivist Research Guidelines**

Researchers guided by an interpretivist philosophy reject some of the guidelines to which positivist researchers seek to adhere. In fact, there are a wide variety of specific approaches that can be termed “interpretivist,” and each has some guidelines that it highlights. For those working within the constructivist perspective, Guba and Lincoln (1989:42) suggest four key steps for researchers, each of which may be repeated many times in a given study:

1. Identify stakeholders and solicit their “claims, concerns, and issues.”
2. Introduce the claims, concerns, and issues of each stakeholder group to the other stakeholder groups and ask for their reactions.
3. Focus further information collection on claims, concerns, and issues about which there is disagreement among stakeholder groups.
4. Negotiate with stakeholder groups about the information collected and attempt to reach consensus on the issues about which there is disagreement.

**Exhibit 3.5  The Hermeneutic Circle**

![Hermeneutic Circle Diagram](source: Adapted from Guba & Lincoln, 1989:152. Reprinted with permission.)

KEY: R = Respondent  
C = Construction

*Source: Adapted from Guba & Lincoln, 1989:152. Reprinted with permission.*
An Interpretivist Research Goal: Creating Change

Social researchers with an interpretivist or constructivist orientation often reject explicitly the traditional positivist distinction between facts and values (Sjoberg & Nett, 1968). Robert Bellah and his Habits of the Heart coauthors (1985) have instead proposed a model of “social science as public philosophy.” In this model, social scientists focus explicit attention on achieving a more just society:

Social science makes assumptions about the nature of persons, the nature of society, and the relation between persons and society. It also, 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.

Social science as public philosophy, by breaking through the iron curtain between the social sciences and the humanities, becomes a form of social self-understanding or self-interpretation. By probing the past as well as the present, by looking at “values” as much as at “facts,” such a social science is able to make connections that are not obvious and to ask difficult questions. (Bellah et al., 1985:301)

William Foote Whyte (1991) proposed a more activist approach to research called participatory action research. As the name implies, this approach encourages social researchers to get “out of the academic rut” and bring values into the research process (Whyte, 1991:285).

In participatory action research, the researcher involves as active participants some members of the setting studied. Both the organizational members and the researcher are assumed to want to develop valid conclusions, to bring unique insights, and to desire change, but Whyte believed these objectives were more likely to be obtained if the researcher collaborated actively with the persons he studied. For example, many academic studies have found that employee participation is associated with job satisfaction, but not with employee productivity. After some discussions about this finding with employees and managers, Whyte (1991:278–279) realized that researchers had been using a general concept of employee participation that did not distinguish those aspects of participation that were most likely to influence productivity. For example, occasional employee participation in company meetings had not been distinguished from ongoing employee participation in and control of production decisions. When these and other concepts were defined more precisely, it became clear that employee participation in production decisions had substantially increased overall productivity, whereas simple meeting attendance had not. This discovery would not have occurred without the active involvement of company employees in planning the research.

An Integrated Philosophy

It is tempting to think of positivism and postpositivism as representing an opposing research philosophy to interpretivism and constructivism. Then it seems that we should choose the one philosophy that seems closest to our own preferences and condemn the other as “unscientific,” “uncaring,” or perhaps just “unrealistic.” But there are good reasons to prefer a research philosophy that integrates some of the differences between these philosophies (Smith, 1991).
Society is a product of human action that in turn shapes how people act and think. The "sociology of knowledge" studies this process by which people make themselves as they construct society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Individuals internalize the social order through the process of socialization, so that their own beliefs and actions are not entirely of their own making, but instead reflect the social order of which they are a part. This means that we should be very careful to consider how our research approaches and interpretations are shaped by our own social background—just as we are cautioned to do by interpretivist researchers.

When we peer below the surface of standardized research procedures, we also discover the importance of taking into account people's feelings and the meanings that they attach to these feelings. For example, Danielle Lavin and Douglas Maynard (2001) investigated how different survey research centers handle laughter by respondents during telephone surveys. The dilemma for the centers is this: When respondents laugh during an interview, it usually is an attempt to increase rapport with the interviewer, so turning down the "invitation" to laugh can make the interviewer seem unsympathetic. However, accepting this "invitation" to laugh injects an uncontrolled source of bias into what is supposed to be a standardized interview. As interviewers manage laughter in the interview, they artfully maneuver through the dilemma of adhering to standardization protocols while maintaining rapport with respondents that retains participation and continues to elicit answers. (Lavin & Maynard, 2001:473)

As a result, what appear to be standardized interviews in fact vary in ways that are not apparent in the answers recorded by the interviewer. Recognition of this interpretive process can improve survey research conducted in the positivist tradition.

Recent research on cognitive functioning (how the brain works) suggests there are neurological reasons to expect that people's feelings shape their perceptions in ways that are often not apparent (Seidman, 1997). Emotional responses to external stimuli travel a shorter circuit in the brain, through a small structure called the amygdala, than do reasoned responses (see Exhibit 3.6). The result, according to some cognitive scientists, is that "what something reminds us of can be far more important than what it is" (Goleman, 1995: 294–295). Our emotions can influence us even before we begin to reason about what we have observed.

So researchers can't ignore the subjective aspects of human experience or expunge it entirely from the data collection process. This helps to explain why the debate continues between positivist and interpretivist philosophies and why research can often be improved by drawing on insights from both.

And what about the important positivist distinction between facts and values in social research? Here, too, there is evidence that neither the "value-free" presumption of positivists nor the constructivist critique of this position is entirely correct. For example, Joachim L. Savelberg, Ryan King, and Lara Cleveland (2002) examined influences on the focus and findings of published criminal justice scholarship. They found that criminal justice research was more likely to be oriented to topics and theories suggested by the state when it was funded by government agencies. This reflects a political influence on scholarship. However, government funding did not have any bearing on the researchers' conclusions about the criminal justice processes they examined. This suggests that scientific procedures can insulate the research process itself from political pressure.
EXTENDING SOCIAL SCIENCE INVESTIGATIONS

Using multiple methods in a single study can lessen the risk of arriving at mistaken conclusions, but it is also important to consider the larger picture. Focusing on people and processes in just one setting can obscure or distort important social processes. Concluding, on the basis of one study, that arrest deters spouse abuse is very different from concluding, after several studies, that arrest deters spouse abuse only if the abuser is employed. Taking social context into account will improve our understanding of important concepts and causal processes and identify the limits to our generalizations. We also need to consider the possibility of influence from the natural world in which social life takes place. Are there biological processes or ecological relationships that influence particular social processes?

Social Context

Do the processes in which we are interested vary across neighborhoods? Among organizations? Across regions? These are the types of questions we seek to answer by taking social
context into account. When relationships among variables differ across geographic units like counties or across other contexts, researchers say there is a **contextual effect**.

**Case Study: Juvenile Justice**

Robert Sampson and John Laub (1993) drew a large sample of 538,000 juvenile justice cases from 322 counties across the United States. They then matched these case data from official records with census data on county social characteristics. They hypothesized that juvenile justice would be harsher in areas characterized by racial poverty and a large underclass. Statistical analysis of their data supported the hypothesis: In counties having a relatively large underclass and poverty concentrated among minorities, juvenile cases were more likely to be treated harshly. These relationships occurred for both African American and white juveniles, but were particularly strong for African Americans. Racial polarization and underclass poverty, not the overall affluence of the county, shaped juvenile justice case processing.

The results of this research suggest the importance of taking social context into account when examining criminal justice processes. Studies limited to one social context would not be generalizable to the entire country and would seriously misrepresent the role of race and other factors (Dannefer & Schutt, 1982; Schutt & Dannefer, 1988). Awareness of contextual differences helps to make sense of the discrepant findings from local studies of juvenile justice case processing.

**The Natural World**

Although the social world is sufficiently complex to challenge the most able researcher, features of the natural world must also be taken into account in order to explain some social phenomena. The natural environment in which people live and the biology of the human body interact with social processes in many ways.

**Case Study: Adolescent Sexuality**

J. Richard Udry’s (1988) study of adolescent sexuality is a methodologically ambitious effort to evaluate biological influences on social processes. Udry studied 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade public school students in a southern U.S. city. After signing a consent form (their parents also had to sign a consent form), the students completed a questionnaire about their sexual behavior and attitudes and gave blood samples. Udry then identified effects of both social environment and hormone levels in the blood on sexual behavior and attitudes. Such social variables as church attendance, best (same-sex) friend’s attitude toward sexual permissiveness, and the permissiveness of the respondent’s own sexual attitudes were related to sexual behavior, but so were levels of testosterone and other hormones.

Tracing the relationship between biological and social processes only begins to identify the many ways in which the natural world influences social life. Microorganisms that spread disease, pollutants that stunt growth, and rivers that power electric generators all shape social life. Keeping possible connections between the natural world and the social world in mind can often result in more interesting research questions and more powerful research designs (Fremont & Bird, 1999; Janesick, 1994:215).
CONCLUSIONS

It is no exaggeration to say that the physical and natural sciences have forever changed the course of human society through such technological innovations as computers, airplanes, nuclear power, brain-imaging devices, and genetic engineering, to name just a few. Social science has not had this much impact, but it does influence many aspects of social life, from the design of social programs and the electoral strategies of politicians to the selection of jurors and the strategies of business. Most important, social science research continues to shape our understanding of the social world. The social theories that we develop and refine through research help us to see who we are and what we can become.

KEY TERMS

Conflict theory
Constructivist paradigm
Contextual effect
Functionalist theory
Gemeinschaft
Gesellschaft
Hermeneutic circle
Interpretivism
Intersubjective agreement
Normal science
Paradigm shift
Participatory action research
Positivism
Postpositivism
Rational choice theory
Scientific paradigm
Scientific revolution
Symbolic interaction theory
Verstehen

HIGHLIGHTS

• Social science emerged during Europe’s Industrial Revolution as community-based social bonds weakened and individual social roles became more fragmented.

• Functionalism focuses attention on the ways that individuals and social groups help to maintain society and explains social phenomena in terms of these social consequences.

• Conflict theory focuses attention on the bases of conflict between social groups and uses these conflicts to explain most social phenomena.

• Rational choice theory focuses attention on the rational bases for social exchange and explains most social phenomena in terms of these motives.

• Symbolic interactionist theory focuses attention on the meanings that people attach to and gain from social interaction and explains most social phenomena in terms of these meanings.

• Positivism and postpositivism are research philosophies that emphasize the goal of understanding the real world; these philosophies guide most quantitative researchers. Interpretivism is a research philosophy that emphasizes understanding the meaning people attach to their experiences; it guides many qualitative researchers.

• The constructivist paradigm reflects an interpretivist philosophy. It 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 gradually develop a shared perspective on the issue being studied.
- Responsible social researchers must be sensitive to the ways in which social and emotional processes can influence problem formulation, data collection, and conclusions.
- Social scientists, like all scientists, should structure their research so that their own ideas can be proved wrong, should disclose their methods for others to critique, and should recognize the possibility of error. Eight specific guidelines are recommended here.
- Some researchers reject the separation of facts from values in the research process and instead urge using research to achieve valued objectives. In one such approach, participatory action research, researchers collaborate actively with those whom they study.
- Social processes can vary with social context and with biological and physical factors. Social researchers should consider carefully whether to take either into account in a specific research project.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. You read in Chapter 2 about Sherman and Berk’s study of the police response to domestic violence. They tested a prediction derived from rational choice theory. Propose hypotheses about the response to domestic violence that are consistent with functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist theories. Which theory seems to you to provide the best framework for understanding domestic violence and how to respond to it?

2. Do you have a theoretical preference? What seem to you to be the strong and weak points of the four theoretical perspectives we have studied? How can you explain your preference for a “tour guide” in terms of your own background, either intellectual or personal?

3. Continue the debate between positivism and interpretivism with an in-class debate. Be sure to review the guidelines for these research philosophies and the associated goals. You might also consider whether an integrated philosophy is preferable.

4. Do social research methods provide a firm foundation for understanding the social world? Discuss the pro and con arguments focusing on the variability of social research findings across different social contexts and the difficulty of understanding human subjectivity.

**PRACTICE EXERCISES**

1. Defend your favorite theory! Review a social science book or journal article that uses social theory to explain some social phenomenon. Prepare a short presentation in which you describe the theory, give some background about it, and explain why it was appropriate for this study. Ask the class for comments at the end of your presentation and be prepared to defend yourself.

2. What is the state of the debate between positivist and interpretivist research philosophies? Search *Sociological Abstracts* for articles that used the terms “positivism” or “interpretivism” (and perhaps “postpositivism” and “constructivism”). Based on the abstracts, list points that are made in support of and in opposition to both perspectives.

3. Outline your own research philosophy. You can base your outline primarily on your reactions to the points you have read in this chapter, but try also to think seriously about which perspective seems more reasonable to you.

4. Pair up with one other student and select one of the research articles you have reviewed for other exercises. Criticize the research in terms of its adherence to each of the eight positivist guidelines for social research, being generally negative but not unreasonable in your criticisms. The student with whom you are working should critique the article in the same way but from a generally positive standpoint,
defending its adherence to the eight guidelines but without ignoring the study’s weak points. Together, write a summary of the study’s strong and weak points, or conduct a debate in class.

5. Criticize one of the research articles you have reviewed for other exercises in terms of its adherence to each of the eight positivist guidelines for social research. Discuss the extent to which the study adhered to each guideline and indicate what problem or problems might have occurred in the research as a result of deviation from the guidelines.

WEB EXERCISES

1. You can read a brief summary of three of the four theoretical perspectives introduced in this chapter at http://ryoung001.homestead.com/AssessingTheory.html. Which description do you find most appealing? Can you find other sites that take more partisan positions in favor of one theory?

2. There are many interesting Web sites that discuss philosophy of science issues. Read the summary of the difference between positivism and interpretivism at http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/374/11517. What does this article add to your understanding of the philosophical alternatives?

SPSS EXERCISES

1. To what extent does the American population interpret social issues in a way that is consistent with conflict theory? Examine the distribution of responses to the questions about the labor movement, subjective class, and feelings about the job:
   a. Click on Analyze|Descriptive Statistics|Frequencies.
   b. Highlight the following variables and click them into the Variable(s) box:
      CONLABOR, CLASS, JOBLOSE, SATJOB, SATFIN.
   c. Examine the Valid Percents and then write a brief description of American attitudes related to class.
   d. Write a conclusion in which you explain how your findings might be viewed as relevant for conflict theory.

2. Repeat the process in Exercise 1 for the other three theoretical perspectives. Feel free to substitute other variables that you think are relevant to each theory. Here are some suggestions, but realize that you’ll have to be a bit creative in linking the theories to these variables:
   Functionalism: RELIG, ATTEND, RELITEN. (Remember Durkheim on suicide and social bonds?)
   Symbolic interactionism: SOCFREND, SOCREL, SOCOMMUN, FEAR, EMAILHR.
   Rational choice: NOGOVT, WLTHPOV, CHOICE, CNTRLIFE.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

1. Which general theoretical perspective do you believe is most appropriate to guide your proposed research? Write two paragraphs in which you: (1) summarize the major tenets of the theoretical perspective you choose; and (2) explain the relevance of this perspective to your research problem.

2. What middle range theory (or theories) could be used to develop specific hypotheses for your research? You may need to search the literature to answer this question.

3. Which research philosophy is most appropriate for your project? Write a paragraph in which you explain your choice. Start the paragraph with the following statement: “My research approach will reflect a [your choice] perspective. I believe this perspective is most appropriate for my investigation because . . .”