1 Social research strategies

CHAPTER GUIDE

The chief aim of this chapter is to show that a variety of considerations enter into the process of doing social research. The distinction that is commonly drawn among writers on and practitioners of social research between *quantitative research* and *qualitative research* is explored in relation to these considerations. This chapter explores:

- the nature of the relationship between theory and research, in particular whether theory guides research (known as a *deductive* approach) or whether theory is an outcome of research (known as an *inductive* approach);
- *epistemological* issues—that is, ones to do with what is regarded as appropriate knowledge about the social world, one of the most crucial aspects is the question of whether or not a natural science model of the research process is suitable for the study of the social world;
- *ontological* issues—that is, ones to do with whether the social world is regarded as something external to social actors or as something that people are in the process of fashioning;

- the ways in which these issues relate to the widely used distinction in the social sciences between two types of *research strategy*: quantitative and qualitative research; there is also a preliminary discussion, which will be followed up in Chapter 21, that suggests that, while quantitative and qualitative research represent different approaches to social research, we should be wary of driving a wedge between them;
- the ways in which *values* and *practical issues* also impinge on the social research process.

Introduction

This book is about social research. It attempts to equip people who have some knowledge of the social sciences with an appreciation of how social research should be conducted and what it entails. The latter project involves situating social research in the context of sociology, which in turn means attending to the question of its role in the overall enterprise of the discipline. It would be much easier to 'cut to the chase' and explore the nature of methods of social research and provide advice on how best to choose between and implement them. After all, many people might expect a book with the title of the present one to be concerned mainly with the ways in which the different methods in the social researcher's arsenal can be employed.

But the practice of social research does not exist in a bubble, hermetically sealed off from the social sciences and the various intellectual allegiances that their practitioners hold. Two points are of particular relevance here.

First, methods of social research are closely tied to different visions of how social reality should be studied. Methods are not simply neutral tools: they are linked with the ways in which social scientists envision the connection between different viewpoints about the nature of social reality and how it should be examined. However, it is possible to overstate this point. While methods are not neutral, they are not entirely suffused with intellectual inclinations either. Secondly, there is the question of how research methods and practice connect with the wider social scientific enterprise. Research data are invariably collected in relation to something. The 'something' may be a burning social problem or, more usually, a theory.

This is not to suggest that research is entirely dictated by theoretical concerns. One sometimes finds simple 'fact-finding' exercises published. Fenton *et al*. (1998) conducted a quantitative content analysis of social research reported in the British mass media. They examined national and regional newspapers, television and radio, and also magazines. They admit that one of the main reasons for conducting the research was to establish the amount and types of research that are represented. Sometimes, such exercises are motivated by a concern about a pressing social problem. McKeganey and Barnard (1996) conducted qualitative research involving observation and interviews with prostitutes and their clients in Glasgow. One factor that seems to have prompted this research was the concern about the role of prostitutes in spreading HIV infection (McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 3). Another scenario occurs when research is done on a topic when a specific opportunity arises. The interest of Westergaard *et al*. (1989) in the effects of redundancy seems to have been profoundly motivated by the opportunity that arose when a Sheffield steel company, which was close to their institutional base at the University of Sheffield, made a large number of people redundant. The firm's management approached the authors a year after the redundancies to conduct research on what happened to the individuals who had been made redundant. The authors conducted social survey research using a structured interview approach on most of those made redundant. Of course, the authors were influenced by theories about and previous research on unemployment, but the specific impetus for the research on the effects of redundancy was not planned. Yet another stimulus for research can arise

out of personal experiences. Lofland and Lofland (1995) note that many research publications emerge out of the researcher's personal biography, such as Zukin's (1982) interest in loft living arising out of her living in a loft in New York City. Another example is O'Reilly's (2002) investigation of British ex-patriates living on the Costa del Sol in Spain which stemmed from her and her partner's dream of moving to the area themselves, which in fact they eventually did. Certainly, my own interest in Disney theme parks can be traced back to a visit to Disney World in Florida in 1991 (Bryman 1995, 1999), while my interest in the representation of social science research in the mass media (Fenton *et al*. 1998) can almost certainly be attributed to a wounding experience with the press reported in Haslam and Bryman (1994).

By and large, however, research data achieve significance in sociology when viewed in relation to theoretical concerns. This raises the issue of the nature of the relationship between theory and research.

Theory and research

Characterizing the nature of the link between theory and research is by no means a straightforward matter. There are several issues at stake here, but two stand out in particular. First, there is the question of what form of theory one is talking about. Secondly, there is the matter of whether data are collected to test or to build theories.

What type of theory?

The term 'theory' is used in a variety of different ways, but its most common meaning is as an explanation of observed regularities, for example, why sufferers of schizophrenia are more likely to come from working-class than middle-class backgrounds, or why work alienation varies by technology. But such theories tend not to be the stuff of courses in sociological theory, which typically focus much more on theories with a higher level of abstraction. Examples of such theories include structural-functionalism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, poststructuralism, structuration theory, and so on. What we see here is a distinction between theories of the former type, which are often called *theories of the middle range* (Merton 1967), and *grand theories*, which operate at a more abstract and general level. According to Merton, grand theories offer few indications to researchers as to how they might guide or influence the collection of empirical evidence. So, if someone wanted to test a theory or to draw an inference from it that could be tested, the level of abstractness is likely to be so great that the researcher would find it difficult to make the necessary links with the real world. There is a paradox here, of course. Even highly abstract ideas, such as Parsons's notions of 'pattern variables' and 'functional requisites', must have some connection with an external reality, in that they are likely to have been generated out of Parsons's reading of research or his reflections upon that reality or others' writings on it. However, the level of abstractness of the theorizing is so great as to make it difficult for them to be deployed in research. For research purposes, then, Merton argued that grand theories are of limited use in connection with social research, although, as the example in Box 1.1 suggests, an abstract theory like structuration theory (Giddens 1984) can have some pay-off in research terms. Instead, middle-range theories are 'intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behavior, organization and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all' (Merton 1967: 39).

By and large, then, it is not grand theory that typically guides social research. Middle-range theories are much more likely to be the focus of empirical enquiry. In fact, Merton formulated the idea as a means of bridging what he saw as a growing gulf between theory (in the sense of grand theory) and empirical

Box 1.1 Grand theory and social research

Giddens's (1984) structuration theory represents an attempt to bridge the gulf between notions of structure and agency in social life and was the theoretical backcloth to an article by Layder *et al*. (1991). The empirical focus of research was the transition from school to work among British 18–24 year olds from four different labour markets. Data were generated through structured interviews and were quantitative. The data allowed the researchers to tease out the relative influence of structural variables (such as, class, gender, and unemployment levels) and individual variables (such as whether the individual had A levels, attitudinal factors such as whether or not respondents considered their futures when choosing jobs, and behavioural factors like a willingness to travel or use informal job search methods). The authors found that the relative importance of structural and individual (agency) variables differed between the six different job segments identified by the authors (for example, clerical, skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled segments). The authors had hypothesized, on the basis of structuration theory, that individual variables would be more significant in connection with higher socio-economic segments and that structural variables would be more significant for lower segments. In fact, the pattern of findings proved more complicated than this and cast some doubt on aspects of the theory. For example, gender was found to be an important factor among all job segment levels.

Box 1.2 Labour process theory: a middle-range theory

In the sociology of work, labour process theory can be regarded as a middle-range theory. The publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman 1974) inaugurated a stream of thinking and research around the idea of the labour process and in particular on the degree to which there has been an inexorable trend towards greater and greater control over the manual worker and deskilling of manual labour. A conference volume of much of this work was published as *Labour Process Theory* (Knights and Willmott 1990). P. Thompson (1989) described the theory as having four elements: the principle that the labour process entails the extraction of surplus value; the need for capitalist enterprises constantly to transform production processes; the quest for control over labour; and the essential conflict between capital and labour. Labour process theory has been the focus of considerable empirical research (e.g. Knights *et al*. 1985).

findings. This is not to say that there were no middle-range theories before he wrote: there definitely were, but what Merton did was to seek to clarify what is meant by 'theory' when social scientists write about the relationship between theory and research.

Middle-range theories, unlike grand ones, operate in a limited domain, whether it is juvenile delinquency, racial prejudice, educational attainment, or the labour process (see Box 1.2). They vary somewhat in their range of application. For example, labelling theory represents a middle-range theory in the sociology of deviance. Its exponents sought to understand deviance in terms of the causes and effects of the societal reaction to deviation. It was held to be applicable to a variety of different forms of deviance, including crime and mental illness. By contrast, Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) differential association theory was formulated specifically in connection with juvenile delinquency and in subsequent years this tended to be its focus. Middle-range theories, then, fall somewhere between grand theories and empirical findings. They represent attempts to understand and explain a limited aspect of social life.

Even the grand/middle-range distinction does not entirely clarify the issues involved in asking the deceptively simple question of 'what is theory?'. This is because the term 'theory' is frequently used in a manner that means little more than the background literature in an area of social enquiry. To a certain extent, this point can be taken to apply to fact-finding exercises such as those referred to above. The analysis of the representation of social research in the media by Fenton *et al*. (1998) was undertaken against a background of similar analyses in the USA and of studies of the representation of natural science research in the media in several different countries.

In many cases, the relevant background literature relating to a topic fuels the focus of an article or book and thereby acts as the equivalent of a theory, as with the research referred to in Box 1.3. In articles or books like Sullivan's (1996) article reported in Box 1.3, there are no, or virtually no, allusions to theories. Instead, the literature in a certain domain acts as the spur to an enquiry. The literature acts as an impetus in a number of ways: the researcher may seek to resolve an inconsistency between different findings or between different interpretations of findings; the researcher may have spotted a neglected aspect of a topic (in a sense, this is what Duncombe and Marsden (1993) did, and which influenced Sullivan—see Box 1.3); certain ideas may not previously have been tested; the researcher may feel that existing approaches being used for research on a topic are deficient, and so provides an alternative approach; and so on.

Box 1.3 Background literature as theory: the case of 'emotion work' among couples

Sullivan (1996) collected data from 380 heterosexual couples concerning the amounts of time they spent in different activities either separately or together. The data were derived from a technique known as time use diaries, which are used rather infrequently by social scientists. She wanted to collect data that were concerned not just with the domestic division of labour between husbands and wives (who does what in the household?) but also with levels of enjoyment. Her findings show that many couples derive particular emotional satisfaction from those activities conducted together. While research into the relationship between women's paid and unpaid work and into the domestic division of labour provided important components of the concerns of Sullivan's research, of particular significance was Duncombe and Marsden's (1993) article, which argued that, unlike their North American counterparts, British sociologists have been relatively indifferent to intimacy and hence to the emotional dimensions of households. The findings are taken to suggest that 'certain activities are . . . more enjoyed when done together' (Sullivan 1996: 96) and are interpreted in terms of the existing literature.

Social scientists are sometimes prone to being somewhat dismissive of research that has no obvious connections with theory—in either the grand or middle-range senses of the term. Such research is often dismissed as naive *empiricism* (see Box 1.4). It would be harsh, not to say inaccurate, to brand as naive empiricism the numerous studies in which the publications-as-theory strategy is employed, simply because their authors have not been preoccupied with theory. Such research is conditioned by and directed towards research questions that arise out of an interrogation of the literature. The data collection and analysis are subsequently geared to the illumination or resolution of the research issue or problem that has been identified at the outset. The literature acts as a proxy for theory. In many instances, theory is latent or implicit in the literature.

Indeed, research that appears to have the characteristics of the 'fact-finding exercise' should not be prematurely dismissed as naive empiricism either. McKeganey and Barnard's (1996) research on prostitutes and their clients is a case in point. On the face of it, even if one strips away the concern with HIV infection, the research could be construed as naive empiricism and perhaps of a rather prurient kind. However, this again would be a harsh and probably inaccurate judgement. For example, the authors relate their research findings to the literature reporting other investigations of prostitutes in a number of different countries. They also illuminate their findings by drawing on ideas that are very much part

Box 1.4  What is empiricism?

The term 'empiricism' is used in a number of different ways, but two stand out. First, it is used to denote a general approach to the study of reality that suggests that only knowledge gained through experience and the senses is acceptable. In other words, this position means that ideas must be subjected to the rigours of testing before they can be considered knowledge. The second meaning of the term is related to this and refers to a belief that the accumulation of 'facts' is a legitimate goal in its own right. It is this second meaning that is sometimes referred to as 'naive empiricism'.

of the sociologist's conceptual tool kit. One example is Goffman's (1963) notion of 'stigma' and the way in which the stigmatized individual seeks to manage a spoiled identity; another is Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional labour', a term she coined to denote the way in which airline flight attendants contrive a demeanour of friendliness when dealing with passengers, some of whom may be extremely difficult.

It is not possible to tell from McKeganey and Barnard's (1996) report whether the concepts of stigma and emotional labour influenced their data collection. However, raising this question invites consideration of another question: insofar as any piece of research is linked to theory, what was the role of that theory? Up to this point, I have tended to write as though theory is something that guides and influences the collection and analysis of data. In other words, research is done in order to answer questions posed by theoretical considerations. But an alternative position is to view theory as something that occurs after the collection and analysis of some or all of the data associated with a project. We begin to see here the significance of a second factor in considering the relationship between theory and research—whether we are referring to deductive or inductive theory.

Deductive and inductive theory

Deductive theory represents the commonest view of the nature of the relationship between theory and social research. The researcher, on the basis of what is known about in a particular domain and of theoretical considerations in relation to that domain, deduces a hypothesis (or hypotheses) that must then be subjected to empirical scrutiny. Embedded within the hypothesis will be concepts that will need to be translated into researchable entities. The social scientist must both skilfully deduce a hypothesis and then translate it into operational terms. This means that the social scientist needs to specify how data can be collected in relation to the concepts that make up the hypothesis.

This view of the role of theory in relation to research is very much the kind of role that Merton had in mind in connection with middle-range theory, which, he argued, 'is principally used in sociology to guide empirical inquiry' (Merton 1967: 39). Theory and the hypothesis deduced from it come first and drive the process of gathering data (see Box 1.5 for an example of a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and data). The sequence can be depicted as one in which the steps outlined in Figure 1.1 take place.

The last step involves a movement that is in the opposite direction from deduction—it involves *induction*, as the researcher infers the implications of his or her findings for the theory that prompted the whole exercise. The findings are fed back into the stock of theory and the research findings associated with a certain domain of enquiry. This can be seen in the case of the final reflections of Layder *et al*. (1991) on the implications of their findings for structuration theory (see Box 1.1): 'Thus we conclude that empirically structure and action [i.e. agency] are interdependent . . . but partly autonomous and separate domains. In this respect our findings lead us to conclude that the empirical applicability of structuration theory concerning the interconnection between structural and individual variables is somewhat more limited than has hitherto been acknowledged' (Layder *et al*. 1991: 461). However, while this element of inductiveness undoubtedly exists in the approach outlined, it is typically deemed to be predominantly deductive in orientation. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that, when this deductive approach, which is usually associated with quantitative research, is put into operation, it often does not follow the sequence outlined in its pure form. As previously noted, 'theory' may be little more than the literature on a certain topic in the form of the accumulated knowledge gleaned from books and articles. Also, even when theory or theories can be discerned, explicit hypotheses are not always deduced from them in the way that Kelley and De Graaf (1997) did in Box 1.5. A further point to bear in mind is that the deductive process appears very linear—one step follows the other in a clear, logical sequence. However, there are many instances where this is not the case: a researcher's view of the theory or literature may have changed as a result of the analysis of the collected data; new theoretical ideas or findings may be published by others before the researcher has generated his or her findings; or, as in the case of

Box 1.5 A deductive study

Kelley and De Graaf (1997) show that a number of studies have examined the factors that have an impact upon individuals' religious beliefs, such as parents, schools and friends, but they also argue that there are good grounds for thinking that the nation into which one is born will be an important cross-cultural factor. These reflections constitute what they refer to as the 'theory' that guided their research and from which the following hypothesis was derived: 'People born into religious nations will, in proportion to the orthodoxy of their fellow-citizens, acquire more orthodox beliefs than otherwise similar people born into secular nations' (1997: 641). There are two central concepts in this hypothesis that would need to be measured: national religiosity (whether it is religious or secular) and individual religious orthodoxy. The authors hypothesized further that the religious orientation of the individual's family (whether devout or secular) would affect the nature of the relationship between national religiosity and religious orthodoxy.

To test the hypotheses a secondary analysis was conducted on large sample survey research from fifteen nations. UK readers will be interested to know that the British and Northern Irish (and Irish Republic) data were derived from the British Social Attitudes survey for 1991 (Jowell *et al.* 1992). Religious orthodoxy was measured by four survey questions concerned with religious belief. The questions asked about (1) whether the person believed in God, (2) their past beliefs about God, (3) how close the individual felt to God, and (4) whether he or she felt that God cares about everyone. To measure national religiosity, the fifteen nations were classified into one of five categories ascending from secular to religious. The classification was undertaken according to 'an unweighted average of parental church attendance . . . and religious belief in the nation as a whole' (1997: 647). Family religious orientation was measured on a scale of five levels of parental church attendance. The hypotheses were broadly confirmed and the authors conclude that the 'religious environment of a nation has a major impact on the beliefs of its citizens' (1997: 654). Some of the implications of the findings for theories about international differences in religiosity are then outlined.

This study demonstrates the process whereby hypotheses are deduced from existing theory and these then guide the process of data collection so that they can be tested.

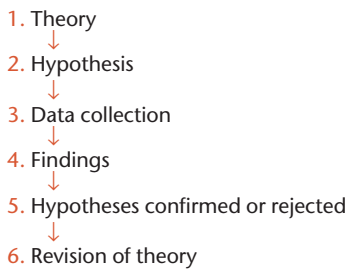

Figure 1.1 The process of deduction

Layder *et al.* (1991), the relevance of a set of data for a theory may become apparent *after* the data have been collected.

This may all seem rather surprising and confusing. There is a certain logic to the idea of developing theories and then testing them. In everyday contexts, we commonly think of theories as things that are quite illuminating but that need to be tested before they can be considered valid or useful. In point of fact, however, while the process of deduction outlined in Figure 1.1 does undoubtedly occur, it is better considered as a general orientation to the link between theory and research. As a general orientation, its broad contours may frequently be discernible in social research, but it is also the case that we often find departures from it. However, in some research *no* attempt is made to follow the sequence outlined in Figure 1.1. Some researchers prefer an approach to the relationship between theory and research that is primarily *inductive*. With an inductive stance, theory is the *outcome* of research. In other words, the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations. Figure 1.2 attempts to capture the essence of the difference between inductivism and deductivism.

However, just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail

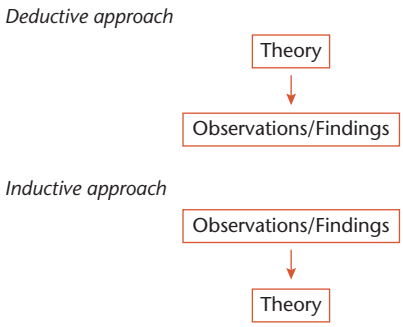

Figure 1.2 Deductive and inductive approaches to the relationship between theory and research

a modicum of deduction. Once the phase of theoretical reflection on a set of data has been carried out, the researcher may want to collect further data in order to establish the conditions in which a theory will and will not hold. Such a general strategy is often called *iterative*: it involves a weaving back and forth between data and theory. It is particularly evident in *grounded theory*, which will be examined in Chapter 19, but in the meantime the basic point is to note that induction represents an alternative strategy for linking theory and research, although it contains a deductive element too.

However, as with 'theory' in connection with the deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, we have to be cautious about the use of the term in the context of the inductive strategy too. While some researchers undoubtedly develop theories, equally it is necessary to be aware that very often what one ends up with can often be little more than empirical generalizations of the kind Merton (1967) wrote about. In Box 1.6 is an example of research that can be classified as inductive in the sense that it develops a theory out of interview data deriving from men suffering from chronic illness concerning what determines successful coping mechanisms for males afflicted with such a condition. In fact, the analytic strategy adopted by the author (Charmaz 1997) was grounded theory, and it is certainly the case that many of the most prominent examples of inductive research derive from this tradition (see the other chapters in Strauss and Corbin, 1997, from which Charmaz's example was taken).

Box 1.6 An inductive study

Charmaz (1991, 1997) has been concerned to examine a number of aspects of the experiences of people with chronic illness. One phase of her research has entailed the examination specifically of men with such a condition. In one of her reports (Charmaz 1997), she discusses the results of her research into twenty men suffering from chronic illness. The bulk of her data derive from semi-structured interviews. In order to bring out the distinctiveness of men's responses, she compared the findings relating to men with a parallel study of women with chronic illness. She argues that a key component of men's responses is that of a strategy of *preserving self*. Although the experience of chronic illness invariably necessitates a change of lifestyle that itself occasions a change in personal identity, the men sought to preserve their sense of self by drawing on 'essential qualities, attributes, and identities of [the] past self ' (1997: 49). By contrast, women were less reliant in their strategies of preserving self on the recapturing of past identities. She relates her theoretical reflections of her data to her male respondents' notions of masculine identity. Her emphasis on the idea of preserving self allows her to assess the factors that lie behind whether a man with chronic illness will 'reconstruct a positive identity or sink into depression' (1997: 57). If they were unable to have access to actions that would allow their sense of past self to be extended into the future (for example, through work), the probability of their sinking into depression was enhanced.

In this study, the inductive nature of the relationship between theory and research can be seen in the way that Charmaz's theoretical ideas (such as the notion of 'preserving self') derive from her data rather than being prior to the data.

Charmaz's (1997) research is an interesting illustration of an inductive approach. Two points are particularly worth noting about it. First, as previously noted, it uses a grounded theory approach to the analysis of data and to the generation of theory. This approach, which was first outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is often regarded as especially strong in terms of generating theories out of data. This contrasts with the nature of many supposedly inductive studies, which generate interesting and illuminating

findings but whose theoretical significance is not entirely clear. They provide insightful empirical generalizations, but little theory. Secondly, in much the same way that the deductive strategy is associated with a quantitative research approach, an inductive strategy of linking data and theory is typically associated with a qualitative research approach. It is not a coincidence that Charmaz's (1997) research referred to in Box 1.6 is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews that produced qualitative data in the form of respondents' detailed answers to her questions. However, as will be shown below, this characterization of the inductive strategy as associated with qualitative research is not entirely straightforward: not only does much qualitative research *not* generate theory, but also theory is often used at the very least as a background to qualitative investigations.

It is useful to think of the relationship between theory and research in terms of deductive and inductive strategies. However, as the previous discussion has implied, the issues are not as clear-cut as they are sometimes presented. To a large extent, deductive and inductive strategies are possibly better thought of as tendencies rather than as a hard-and-fast distinction. But these are not the only issues that impinge on the conduct of social research.

Epistemological considerations

An epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. A particularly central issue in this context is the question of whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures, and ethos as the natural sciences. The position that affirms the importance of imitating the natural sciences is invariably associated with an epistemological position known as *positivism* (see Box 1.7).

A natural science epistemology: positivism

The doctrine of positivism is extremely difficult to pin down and therefore to outline in a precise manner, because it is used in a number of different ways by authors. For some writers, it is a descriptive category—one that describes a philosophical position that can be discerned in research—though there are still disagreements about what it comprises; for others, it is a pejorative term used to describe crude and often superficial data collection.

It is possible to see in the five principles in Box 1.7 a link with some of the points that have already been raised about the relationship between theory and research. For example, positivism entails elements of both a deductive approach (2) and an inductive

Box 1.7 What is positivism?

Positivism is an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. But the term stretches beyond this principle, though the constituent elements vary between authors. However, positivism is also taken to entail the following:

1. Only phenomena and hence knowledge confirmed by the senses can genuinely be warranted as knowledge (the principle of *phenomenalism*).
2. The purpose of theory is to generate hypotheses that can be tested and that will thereby allow explanations of laws to be assessed (the principle of *deductivism*).
3. Knowledge is arrived at through the gathering of facts that provide the basis for laws (the principle of *inductivism*).
4. Science must (and presumably can) be conducted in a way that is value free (that is, *objective*).
5. There is a clear distinction between scientific statements and normative statements and a belief that the former are the true domain of the scientist. This last principle is implied by the first because the truth or otherwise of normative statements cannot be confirmed by the senses.

strategy (3). Also, a fairly sharp distinction is drawn between theory and research. The role of research is to test theories and to provide material for the development of laws. But either of these connections between theory and research carries with it the implication that it is possible to collect observations in a manner that is not influenced by pre-existing theories. Moreover, theoretical terms that are not directly amenable to observation are not considered genuinely scientific; they must be susceptible to the rigours of observation. All of this carries with it the implication of greater epistemological status being given to observation than to theory.

It should be noted that it is a mistake to treat positivism as synonymous with science and the scientific. In fact, philosophers of science and of the social sciences differ quite sharply over how best to characterize scientific practice, and since the early 1960s there has been a drift away from viewing it in positivist terms. Thus, when writers complain about the limitations of positivism, it is not entirely clear whether they mean the philosophical term or a scientific approach more generally. *Realism* (in particular, *critical realism*), for example, is another philosophical position that purports to provide an account of the nature of scientific practice (see Box 1.8).

Box 1.8  What is realism?

Realism shares two features with positivism: a belief that the natural and the social sciences can and should apply the same kinds of approach to the collection of data and to explanation, and a commitment to the view that there is an external reality to which scientists direct their attention (in other words, there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it). There are two major forms of realism:

- *Empirical realism* simply asserts that, through the use of appropriate methods, reality can be understood. This version of realism is sometimes referred to as *naive realism* to reflect the fact that it is often assumed by realists that there is a perfect (or at least very close) correspondence between reality and the term used to describe it. As such, it 'fails to recognise that there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events' and is therefore 'superficial' (Bhaskar 1989: 2). This is perhaps the most common meaning of the term. When writers employ the term 'realism' in a general way, it is invariably this meaning to which they are referring.
- *Critical realism* is a specific form of realism whose manifesto is to recognize the reality of the natural order and the events and discourses of the social world and holds that 'we will only be able to understand—and so change—the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses. . . . These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events; they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences' (Bhaskar 1989: 2).

Critical realism implies two things. First, it implies that, whereas positivists take the view that the scientist's conceptualization of reality actually directly reflects that reality, realists argue that the scientist's conceptualization is simply a way of knowing that reality. As Bhaskar (1975: 250) has put it: 'Science, then, is the systematic attempt to express in thought the structures and ways of acting of things that exist and act independently of thought'. Critical realists acknowledge and accept that the categories they employ to understand reality are likely to be provisional. Thus, unlike naive realists, critical realists recognize that there is a distinction between the objects that are the focus of their enquiries and the terms they use to describe, account for, and understand it. Secondly, by implication, critical realists unlike positivists are perfectly content to admit into their explanations theoretical terms that are not directly amenable to observation. As a result, hypothetical entities which account for regularities in the natural or social orders (the 'generative mechanisms' to which Bhaskar refers) are perfectly admissible for realists, but not for positivists. For critical realists, it is acceptable that generative mechanisms are not directly observable since they are admissable on the grounds that their effects are observable. What makes critical realism *critical* is that the identification of generative mechanisms offers the prospect of introducing changes that can transform the status quo. Box 21.1 provides an example of research using a critical realist approach. This example can be read profitably at this stage even though it is in a much later chapter.

The crux of the epistemological considerations that form the central thrust of this section is the rejection by some writers and traditions of the application of the canons of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. A difficulty here is that it is not easy to disentangle the natural science model from positivism as the butt of their criticisms. In other words, it is not always clear whether they are inveighing against the application of a general natural scientific approach or of positivism in particular. There is a long-standing debate about the appropriateness of the natural science model for the study of society, but, since the account that is offered of that model tends to have largely positivist overtones, it would seem that it is positivism that is the focus of attention rather than other accounts of scientific practice (such as critical realism—see Box 1.8).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a term given to a contrasting epistemology to positivism (see Box 1.9). The term subsumes the views of writers who have been critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world and who have been influenced by different intellectual traditions, which are outlined below. They share a view that the subject matter of the social sciences—people and their institutions—is fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences. The study of the social world therefore requires a different logic of research procedure, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order. Von Wright (1971) has depicted the epistemological clash as being between positivism and *hermeneutics* (a term that is drawn from theology and that, when imported into the social sciences, is concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action). This clash reflects a division between an emphasis on the *explanation* of human behaviour that is the chief ingredient of the positivist approach to the social sciences and the *understanding* of human behaviour. The latter is concerned with the empathic understanding of human action rather than with the forces that are deemed to act on it. This contrast reflects long-standing debates that precede the emergence of the modern social sciences but find their expression in such notions as the advocacy by Max Weber (1864–1920) of a *Verstehen* approach. Weber described Sociology as a 'science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (1947: 88). Weber's definition seems to embrace both explanation *and* understanding here, but the crucial point is that the task of 'causal explanation' is undertaken with reference to the 'interpretive understanding of social action' rather than to external forces that have no meaning for those involved in that social action.

One of the main intellectual traditions that has been responsible for the anti-positivist position has been *phenomenology*, a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how in particular the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions in his or her grasp of that world. The initial application of phenomenological ideas to the social sciences is attributed to the work of Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), whose work did not come to the notice of most English-speaking social scientists until the translation from German of his major writings in the 1960s, some twenty or more years after they had been written. His work was profoundly influenced by Weber's concept of *Verstehen*, as well as by phenomenological philosophers, like Husserl. Schutz's position is well captured in the following passage, which has been quoted on numerous occasions:

> The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist—social

Box 1.9  **What is interpretivism?**

Interpretivism is a term that usually denotes an alternative to the positivist orthodoxy that has held sway for decades. It is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action. Its intellectual heritage includes: Weber's notion of *Verstehen*; the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition; and symbolic interactionism.

> reality—has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women!], living their daily life within the social world. (Schutz 1962: 59)

Two points are particularly noteworthy in this quotation. First, it asserts that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and the social sciences and that an epistemology is required that will reflect and capitalize upon that difference. The fundamental difference resides in the fact that social reality has a meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful—that is, it has a meaning for them and they act on the basis of the meanings that they attribute to their acts and to the acts of others. This leads to the second point—namely, that it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people's 'common-sense thinking' and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view. It is this particular feature that social scientists claiming allegiance to phenomenology have typically emphasized. In the words of the authors of a research methods text whose approach is described as phenomenological: 'The phenomenologist views human behavior . . . as a product of how people interpret the world. . . . In order to grasp the meanings of a person's behavior, *the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view*' (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 13–14, emphasis in original).

In this exposition of *Verstehen* and phenomenology, it has been necessary to skate over some complex issues. In particular, Weber's examination of *Verstehen* is far more complex than the above commentary suggests, because the empathetic understanding that seems to be implied above was not the way in which he applied it (Bauman 1978), while the question of what is and is not a genuinely phenomenological approach to the social sciences is a matter of some dispute (Heap and Roth 1973). However, the similarity in the writings of the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition and of the *Verstehen* approach, with their emphasis upon social action as being meaningful to actors and therefore needing to be interpreted from their point of view, coupled with the rejection of positivism, contributed to a stream of thought often referred to as interpretivism (e.g. J. A. Hughes 1990).

Verstehen and the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition do not exhaust the intellectual influences on interpretivism. The theoretical tradition in sociology known as *symbolic interactionism* has also been regarded by many writers as a further influence. Again, the case is not clear-cut. The implications for empirical research of the ideas of the founders of symbolic interactionism, in particular George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), whose discussion of the way in which our notion of self emerges through an appreciation of how others see us, have been hotly debated. There was a school of research, known as the Iowa school, that has drawn heavily on Mead's concepts and ideas, but has proceeded in a direction that most people would prefer to depict as largely positivist in tone (Meltzer *et al*. 1975). Moreover, some writers have argued that Mead's approach is far more consistent with a natural science approach than has typically been recognized (McPhail and Rexroat 1979). However, the general tendency has been to view symbolic interactionism as occupying similar intellectual space to the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition and so broadly interpretative in approach. This tendency is largely the product of the writings of Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead's who acted as his mentor's spokesman and interpreter, and his followers (Hammersley 1989; R. Collins 1994). Not only did Blumer coin the term symbolic interaction; he also provided a gloss on Mead's writings that has decidedly interpretative overtones. Symbolic interactionists argue that interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environment (which includes the actions of others) and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning. In research terms, according to Blumer (1962: 188), 'the position of symbolic interaction requires the student to catch the process of interpretation

through which [actors] construct their actions', a statement that brings out clearly his views of the research implications of symbolic interactionism and of Mead's thought.

It should be appreciated that the parallelism between symbolic interactionism and the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition should not be exaggerated. The two are united in their antipathy for positivism and have in common an interpretative stance. However, symbolic interactionism is, at least in the hands of Blumer and the many writers and researchers who have followed in his wake, a type of social theory that has distinctive epistemological implications; the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition, by contrast, is best thought of as a general epistemological approach in its own right. Blumer may have been influenced by the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition, but there is no concrete evidence of this. There are other intellectual currents that have affinities with the interpretative stance, such as the working-through of the ramifications of the works of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Winch 1958), but the hermeneutic–phenomenological, *Verstehen*, and symbolic interactionist traditions can be considered major influences.

Taking an interpretative stance can mean that the researcher may come up with surprising findings, or at least findings that appear surprising if a largely external stance is taken—that is, a position from outside the particular social context being studied. Box 1.10 provides an interesting example of this possibility.

Of course, as the example in Box 1.10 suggests, when the social scientist adopts an interpretative stance, he or she is not simply laying bare how members of a social group interpret the world around them. The social scientist will almost certainly be aiming to place the interpretations that have been elicited into a social scientific frame. There is a double interpretation going on: the researcher is providing an interpretation of others' interpretations. Indeed, there is a third level of interpretation going on, because the researcher's interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline. Thus, taking the example in Box 1.10, Foster's (1995) suggestion that Riverside is not perceived as a high crime area by residents is her interpretation of her subjects' interpretations. She then had the additional job of placing her interesting findings into a social scientific frame, which she accomplished by relating them to existing concepts and discussions in criminology of such things as informal social control, neighbourhood watch schemes, and the role of housing as a possible cause of criminal activity.

The aim of this section has been to outline how epistemological considerations—especially those relating to the question of whether a natural science, and in particular a positivist, approach, can supply legitimate knowledge of the social world—are related to research practice. There is a link with the earlier section in that a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research is typically associated with a positivist position. Box 1.7 does try to suggest that inductivism is also a feature of positivism (third principle), but, in the working-through of its implementation in the practice of social research,

Box 1.10 Interpretivism in practice

Foster (1995) conducted ethnographic research using participant observation and semi-structured interviews in a housing estate in East London, referred to as Riverside. The estate had a high level of crime, as indicated by official statistics on crime. However, she found that residents did not perceive the estate to be a high crime area. This perception could be attributed to a number of factors, but a particularly important reason was the existence of 'informal social control'. People expected a certain level of crime, but felt fairly secure because informal social control allowed levels of crime to be contained. Informal social control comprised a number of different aspects. One aspect was that neighbours often looked out for each other. In the words of one of Foster's interviewees: 'If I hear a bang or shouting I go out. If there's aggravation I come in and ring the police. I don't stand for it'. Another aspect of informal social control was that people often felt secure because they knew each other. Another respondent said: 'I don't feel nervous . . . because people do generally know each other. We keep an eye on each others properties . . . I feel quite safe because you know your neighbours and you know they're there . . . they look out for you' (Foster 1995: 575).

it is the deductive element (second principle) that tends to be emphasized. Similarly, the third level of interpretation that a researcher engaged in interpretative research must bring into operation is very much part of the kind of inductive strategy described in the previous section. However, while such interconnections between epistemological issues and research practice exist, it is important not to overstate them, since they represent tendencies rather than definitive points of correspondence. Thus, particular epistemological principles and research practices do not necessarily go hand in hand in a neat unambiguous manner. This point will be made again on several occasions and will be a special focus of Chapter 21.

Ontological considerations

Questions of social ontology are concerned with the nature of social entities. The central point of orientation here is the question of whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors. These positions are frequently referred to respectively as *objectivism* and *constructionism*. Their differences can be illustrated by reference to two of the most common and central terms in social science—organization and culture.

Objectivism

Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach or influence (see Box 1.11).

We can discuss organization or *an* organization as a tangible object. It has rules and regulations. It adopts standardized procedures for getting things done. People are appointed to different jobs within a division of labour. There is a hierarchy. It has a mission statement. And so on. The degree to which these features exist from organization to organization is variable, but in thinking in these terms we are tending to the view that an organization has a reality that is external to the individuals who inhabit it. Moreover, the organization represents a social order in that it exerts pressure on individuals to conform to the requirements of the organization. People learn and apply the rules and regulations. They follow the standardized procedures. They do the jobs to which they are appointed. People tell them what to do and they tell others what to do. They learn and apply the values in the mission statement. If they do not do these things, they may be reprimanded or even fired. The organization is therefore a constraining force that acts on and inhibits its members.

The same can be said of culture. Cultures and subcultures can be viewed as repositories of widely shared values and customs into which people are socialized so that they can function as good citizens or as full participants. Cultures and subcultures constrain us because we internalize their beliefs and values. In the case of both organization and culture, the social entity in question comes across as something external to the actor and as having an almost tangible reality of its own. It has the characteristics of an object and hence of having an objective reality. To a very large extent, these are the 'classic' ways of conceptualizing organization and culture.

Box 1.11  ***What is objectivism?***

Objectivism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors. It implies that social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors.

Constructionism

However, we can consider an alternative ontological position—*constructionism* (Box 1.12). This position

Box 1.12  ***What is constructionism?***

Constructionism is an ontological position (often also referred to as constructivism) that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision. In recent years, the term has come also to include the notion that researchers' own accounts of the social world are constructions. In other words, the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive. Knowledge is viewed as indeterminate. The discussion of postmodernism in Chapter 23 further examines this viewpoint. This sense of constructionism is usually allied to the ontological version of the term. In other words, these are linked meanings. Both meanings are antithetical to *objectivism* (see Box 1.11), but the second meaning is also antithetical to *realism* (see Box 1.8). The first meaning might be thought of usefully as constructionism in relation to the social world; the second as constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world (and indeed the natural world).

Increasingly, the notion of constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world is being incorporated into notions of constructionism, but in this book I will be using the term in relation to the first meaning, whereby constructionism is presented as an ontological position in relating to social objects and categories—that is, one that views them as socially constructed.

challenges the suggestion that categories such as organization and culture are pre-given and therefore confront social actors as external realities that they have no role in fashioning.

Let us take organization first. Strauss *et al*. (1973), drawing on insights from symbolic interactionism, carried out research in a psychiatric hospital and proposed that it was best conceptualized as a 'negotiated order'. Instead of taking the view that order in organizations is a pre-existing characteristic, they argue that it is worked at. Rules were far less extensive and less rigorously imposed than might be supposed from the classic account of organization. Indeed, Strauss *et al*. prefer to refer to them as 'much less like commands, and much more like general understandings' (1973: 308). Precisely because relatively little of the spheres of action of doctors, nurses, and other personnel was prescribed, the social order of the hospital was an outcome of agreed-upon patterns of action that were themselves the products of negotiations between the different parties involved. The social order is in a constant state of change because the hospital is 'a place where numerous agreements are continually being terminated or forgotten, but also as continually being established, renewed, reviewed, revoked, revised. . . . In any pragmatic sense, this is the hospital at the moment: this is its social order' (Strauss *et al*. 1973: 316–17). The authors argue that a preoccupation with the formal properties of organizations (rules, organizational charts, regulations, roles) tends to neglect the degree to which order in organizations has to be accomplished in everyday interaction, though this is not to say that the formal properties have *no* element of constraint on individual action.

Much the same kind of point can be made about the idea of culture. Instead of seeing culture as an external reality that acts on and constrains people, it can be taken to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction. Becker (1982: 521), for example, has suggested that 'people create culture continuously. . . . No set of cultural understandings . . . provides a perfectly applicable solution to any problem people have to solve in the course of their day, and they therefore must remake those solutions, adapt their understandings to the new situation in the light of what is different about it.' Like Strauss *et al*., Becker recognizes that the constructionist position cannot be pushed to the extreme: it is necessary to appreciate that culture has a reality that 'persists and antedates the participation of particular people' and shapes their perspectives, but it is not an inert objective reality that only possesses

a sense of constraint: it acts as a point of reference but is always in the process of being formed.

Neither the work of Strauss *et al*. nor that of Becker pushes the constructionist argument to the extreme. Each admits to the pre-existence of their objects of interest (organization and culture respectively). However, in each case we see an intellectual predilection for stressing the active role of individuals in the social construction of social reality. Not all writers adopting a constructionist position are similarly prepared to acknowledge the existence or at least importance of an objective reality. Walsh, for example, has written that 'we cannot take for granted, as the natural scientist does, the availability of a preconstituted world of phenomena for investigation' and must instead 'examine the processes by which the social world is constructed' (1972: 19). It is precisely this apparent split between viewing the social world as an objective reality and as a subjective reality in a continuous state of flux that Giddens sought to straddle in formulating his idea of structuration (see Box 1.1).

Constructionism also suggests that the categories that people employ in helping them to understand the natural and social world are in fact social products. The categories do not have built-in essences; instead, their meaning is constructed in and through interaction. Thus, a category like 'masculinity' might be treated as a social construction. This notion implies that, rather than being treated as a distinct inert entity, masculinity is construed as something whose meaning is built up during interaction. That meaning is likely to be a highly ephemeral one, in that it will vary by both time and place. This kind of stance frequently displays a concern with the language that is employed to present categories in particular ways. It suggests that the social world and its categories are not external to us, but are built up and constituted in and through interaction. This tendency can be seen particularly in discourse analysis, which is examined in Chapter 17. As Potter (1996: 98) observes: 'The world . . . is *constituted* in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it'. This sense of constructionism is highly antithetical to realism (see Box 1.8). Constructionism frequently results in an interest in the representation of social phenomena. Box 1.13 provides an illustration of this idea in relation to the representation of the breast cancer epidemic in the USA.

Box 1.13 Constructionism in action

Lantz and Booth (1998) have shown that breast cancer can be treated as a social construction. They note that US data show a rise in the incidence of the disease since the early 1980s, which has led to the depiction of the trend as an epidemic. The authors examined a variety of popular magazines using qualitative content analysis (see Box 9.1 for a brief description of this method). They note that many of the articles draw attention to the lifestyles of modern women, such as delaying first births, diet and alcohol consumption, and having careers. The authors argue that the articles

> ascribe blame to individual behaviors by listing a wide array of individual risk factors (many of which are not behaviors of 'traditional' women), and then offering prudent prescriptions for prevention. Women are portrayed as victims of an insidious disease, but also as victims of their own behaviors, many of which are related to the control of their own fertility. . . . These articles suggest that nontraditional women experience pathological repercussions within their bodies and, in turn, may be responsible for our current epidemic of breast cancer. (Lantz and Booth 1998: 915–16)

This article suggests that, as a social category, the breast cancer epidemic is being represented in popular magazines in a particular way—one that blames the victims and the lifestyles of modern women in particular. This is in spite of the fact that fewer than 20 per cent of cases of breast cancer are in women under the age of 50. Lantz and Booth's study is fairly representative of a constructionist ontology in suggesting that the epidemic is not simply being construed as a social fact but is being ascribed a particular meaning (one that blames the victims of the disease). In this way, the representation of the disease in popular magazines forms an important element in its social construction.

Constructionism is also frequently used as a term that reflects the indeterminacy of our knowledge of the social world (see Box 1.12 and the idea of constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world). However, in this book, I will be using the term in connection with the notion that social phenomena and categories are social constructions.

Relationship to social research

Questions of social ontology cannot be divorced from issues concerning the conduct of social research. Ontological assumptions and commitments will feed into the ways in which research questions are formulated and research is carried out. If a research question is formulated in such a way as to suggest that organizations and cultures are objective social entities that act on individuals, the researcher is likely to emphasize the formal properties of organizations or the beliefs and values of members of the culture. Alternatively, if the researcher formulates a research problem so that the tenuousness of organization and culture as objective categories is stressed, it is likely that an emphasis will be placed on the active involvement of people in reality construction. In either case, it might be supposed that different approaches to the design of research and the collection of data will be required.

Research strategy: quantitative and qualitative research

Many writers on methodological issues find it helpful to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research. The status of the distinction is ambiguous, because it is almost simultaneously regarded by some writers as a fundamental contrast and by others as no longer useful or even simply as 'false' (Layder 1993: 110). However, there is little evidence to suggest that the use of the distinction is abating and even considerable evidence of its continued, even growing, currency. The quantitative/qualitative distinction will be employed a great deal in this book, because it represents a useful means of classifying different methods of social research and because it is a helpful umbrella for a range of issues concerned with the practice of social research.

On the face of it, there would seem to be little to the quantitative/qualitative distinction other than the fact that quantitative researchers employ measurement and qualitative researchers do not. It is certainly the case that there is a predisposition among researchers along these lines, but many writers have suggested that the differences are deeper than the superficial issue of the presence or absence of quantification. For many writers, quantitative and qualitative research differ with respect to their epistemological foundations and in other respects too. Indeed, if we take the areas that have been the focus of the last three sections—the connection between theory and research, epistemological considerations, and ontological considerations—quantitative and qualitative research can be taken to form two distinctive clusters of *research strategy*. By a research strategy, I simply mean a general orientation to the conduct of social research. Table 1.1 outlines the differences between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of the three areas.

Thus, quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that:

- entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the accent is placed on the testing of theories;
- has incorporated the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism in particular; and
- embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality.

By contrast, qualitative research can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words

Table 1.1 Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model, in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that:

- predominantly emphasizes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the emphasis is placed on the generation of theories;
- has rejected the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism in particular in preference for an emphasis on the ways in which individuals interpret their social world; and
- embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation.

There is, in fact, considerably more to the quantitative/qualitative distinction than this contrast. In Chapters 3 and 13 the nature of quantitative and then qualitative research respectively will be outlined in much greater detail, while in Chapters 21 and 22 the contrasting features will be further explored. In particular, a number of distinguishing features flow from the commitment of the quantitative research strategy to a positivist epistemology and from the rejection of that epistemology by practitioners of the qualitative research strategy. In other words, the three contrasts in Table 1.1 are basic, though fundamental, ones.

However, the interconnections between the different features of quantitative and qualitative research are not as straightforward as Table 1.1 and the last paragraph imply. While it is useful to contrast the two research strategies, it is necessary to be careful about hammering a wedge between them too deeply. It may seem perverse to introduce a basic set of distinctions and then suggest that they are problematic. A recurring theme of this book is that discussing the nature of social research is just as complex as conducting research in the real world. You may discover general tendencies, but they are precisely that—tendencies. In reality, the picture becomes more complicated the more you delve.

For example, it is common to describe qualitative research as concerned with the generation rather than the testing of theories. However, there are examples of studies in which qualitative research has been employed to test rather than to generate theories. For example, Adler and Adler (1985) were concerned to explore the issue of whether participation in athletics in higher education in the USA is associated with higher or lower levels of academic achievement, an issue on which the existing literature was inconsistent. This is an illustration of the use of the existing literature on a topic being employed as a kind of proxy for theory. The first author was a participant observer for four years of a basketball programme in a university and both authors carried out 'intensive, taped interviews' with players. The authors' findings do lead them to conclude that athletic participation is likely to result in lower academic achievement. This occurs because the programme participants gradually drift from idealistic goals about their academic careers, and a variety of factors lead them to become increasingly detached from academic work. For example, one student is quoted as saying: 'If I was a student like most other students I could do well, but when you play the calibre of ball we do, you just can't be an above-average student. What I strive for now is just to be an average student. . . . You just can't find the time to do all the reading' (Adler and Adler 1985: 247). This study shows how, although

qualitative research is typically associated with generating theories, it can also be employed for testing them.

Moreover, it is striking that, although the Adler and Adler study is broadly interpretivist in epistemological orientation, with its emphasis on how college athletes view their social situation, the findings have objectivist, rather than constructionist, overtones. For example, when the authors describe the students' academic performance as 'determined less by demographic characteristics and high school experiences than by the structure of their college experiences' (Adler and Adler 1985: 249), they are positing a social world that is 'out there' and as having a formal, objective quality. It is an example of qualitative research in the sense that there is no quantification or very little of it, but it does not have *all* the other features outlined in Table 1.1. Similarly, the previously mentioned study by Westergaard *et al.* (1989) of the effects of redundancy was a quantitative study in the sense of being concerned to measure a wide variety of concepts, but exhibited little evidence of a concern to test theories of unemployment or of a stressful life event like redundancy. Instead, its conclusions revolve around seeking to understand how those made redundant responded to the experience in terms of such things as their job-search methods, their inclination to find jobs, and their political attitudes. As such, it has interpretivist overtones in spite of being an exercise in quantitative research.

The point that is being made in this section is that quantitative and qualitative research represent different research strategies and that each carries with it striking differences in terms of the role of theory, epistemological issues, and ontological concerns. However, the distinction is not a hard-and-fast one: studies that have the broad characteristics of one research strategy may have a characteristic of the other. Not only this, but many writers argue that the two can be combined within an overall research project, and Chapter 22 examines precisely this possibility.

Influences on the conduct of social research

We are beginning to get a picture now that social research is influenced by a variety of factors. Figure 1.3 summarizes the influences that have been examined so far, but has added two more—the impact of *values* and of *practical considerations*.

Values

Values reflect either the personal beliefs or the feelings of a researcher. On the face of it, we would expect that social scientists should be value free and objective in their research. After all, one might want to argue that research that simply reflected the personal biases of its practitioners could not be considered valid and scientific because it was bound up with the subjectivities of its practitioners. Such a view is held with less and less frequency among social scientists nowadays. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) wrote that one of the corollaries of his injunction to treat social facts as things was that all 'preconceptions must be eradicated' (1938: 31). Since values are a form of preconception, his exhortation was at least implicitly to do with suppressing them when conducting research. His position is unlikely to be regarded as credible nowadays, because there is a growing recognition that it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in check. These can intrude at any or all of a number of points in the process of social research:

- choice of research area;
- formulation of research question;

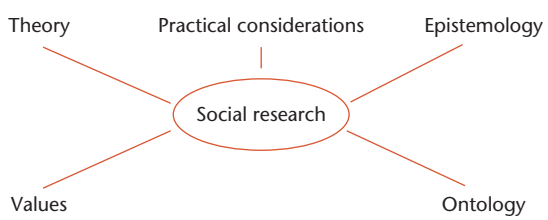

Figure 1.3 Influences on social research

- choice of method;
- formulation of research design and data collection techniques;
- implementation of data collection;
- analysis of data;
- interpretation of data;
- conclusions.

There are, therefore, numerous points at which bias and the intrusion of values can occur. Values can materialize at any point during the course of research. The researcher may develop an affection or sympathy, which was not necessarily present at the outset of an investigation, for the people being studied. It is quite common, for example, for researchers working within a qualitative research strategy, and in particular when they use participant observation or very intensive interviewing, to develop a close affinity with the people that they study to the extent that they find it difficult to disentangle their stance as social scientists from their subjects' perspective. This possibility may be exacerbated by the tendency that Becker (1967) identified for sociologists in particular to be very sympathetic to underdog groups. Equally, social scientists may be repelled by the people they study. The social anthropologist Colin Turnbull (1973) reports the results of his research into an African tribe known as the Ik. Turnbull was appalled by what he witnessed: a loveless (and for him unlovable) tribe that left its young and very old to die. While Turnbull was able to point to the conditions that had led to this state of affairs, he was very honest in his disgust for what he witnessed, particularly during the period of his initial sojourn among the tribe. However, that very disgust is a product of Western values about the family and it is likely, as he acknowledged, that these will have influenced his perception of what he witnessed.

Another position in relation to the whole question of values and bias is to recognize and acknowledge that research cannot be value free but to ensure that there is no untrammelled incursion of values in the research process and to be self-reflective and so exhibit *reflexivity* about the part played by such factors. As Turnbull (1973: 13) put it at the beginning of his book on the Ik: 'the reader is entitled to know something of the aims, expectations, hopes and attitudes that the writer brought to the field with him, for these will surely influence not only how he sees things but even what he sees.' Researchers are increasingly prepared to forewarn readers of their biases and assumptions and how these may have influenced the subsequent findings. There has been a growth since the mid-1970s of collections of inside reports of what doing a piece of research was really like, as against the generalities presented in social research methods textbooks (like this one!). These collections frequently function as 'confessions', an element of which is often the writer's preparedness to be open about his or her personal biases. This point will be taken up further in Chapter 24.

Still another approach is to argue for consciously value-laden research. This is a position taken by some feminist writers who have argued that only research on women that is intendedly *for* women will be consistent with the wider political needs of women. Mies (1993: 68) has argued that in feminist research the 'postulate of *value free research*, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by *conscious partiality*, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects' (emphases in original).

The significance of feminism in relation to values goes further than this, however. In particular, several feminist social researchers around the early 1980s proposed that the principles and practices associated with quantitative research were incompatible with feminist research on women. For writers like Oakley (1981), quantitative research was bound up with male values of control that can be seen in the general orientation of the research strategy—control of the research subject/respondent and control of the research context and situation. Moreover, the research process was seen as one-way traffic, in which researchers extract information from the people being studied and give little or more usually nothing in return. For many feminists, such a strategy bordered on exploitation and was incompatible with feminism's values of sisterhood and non-hierarchical

relationships between women. The antipathy towards quantitative research resulted in a preference for qualitative research among feminists. Not only was qualitative research seen as more consistent with the values of feminism; it was seen as more adaptable to those values. Thus, feminist qualitative research came to be associated with an approach in which the investigator eschewed a value-neutral approach and engaged with the people being studied as people and not simply as respondents to research instruments. The stance of feminism in relation to both quantitative and qualitative approaches demonstrates the ways in which values have implications for the process of social investigation. In more recent years, there has been a softening of the attitudes of feminists towards quantitative research. Several writers have acknowledged a viable and acceptable role for quantitative research, particularly when it is employed in conjunction with qualitative research (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991; Oakley 1998). This issue will be picked up in Chapters 13, 21, and 22.

There are, then, different positions that can be taken up in relation to values and value freedom. Far fewer writers overtly subscribe to the position that the principle of objectivity can be put into practice than in the past. Quantitative researchers sometimes seem to be writing in a way that suggests an aura of objectivity (Mies 1993), but we simply do not know how far they subscribe to such a position. There is a greater awareness today of the limits to objectivity, so that some of the highly confident, not to say naive, pronouncements on the subject, like Durkheim's, have fallen into disfavour. A further way in which values are relevant to the conduct of social research is through the following of ethical principles or standards. This issue will be followed up in Chapter 25.

Practical considerations

Nor should we neglect the importance and significance of *practical issues* in decisions about how social research should be carried out. There are a number of different dimensions to this issue. For one thing, choices of research strategy, design, or method have to be dovetailed with the specific research question being investigated. If we are interested in teasing out the relative importance of a number of different causes of a social phenomenon, it is quite likely that a quantitative strategy will fit our needs, because, as will be shown in Chapter 3, the assessment of cause is one of its keynotes. Alternatively, if we are interested in the world views of members of a certain social group, a qualitative research strategy that is sensitive to how participants interpret their social world may be the direction to choose. If a researcher is interested in a topic on which no or virtually no research has been done in the past, the quantitative strategy may be difficult to employ because there is little prior literature from which to draw leads. A more exploratory stance may be preferable and, in this connection, qualitative research may serve the researcher's needs better, since it is typically associated with the generation rather than the testing of theory (see Table 1.1) and with a relatively unstructured approach to the research process (see Chapter 13). Another dimension may have to do with the nature of the topic and of the people being investigated. For example, if the researcher needs to engage with individuals or groups involved in illicit activities, such as violence (Patrick 1973), pilferage (Ditton 1977), or drug dealing (P. A. Adler 1985), it is unlikely that a social survey would gain the confidence of the subjects involved or achieve the necessary rapport. It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers in these areas have tended to use a qualitative strategy. By contrast, it does not seem likely that the hypothesis in the research described in Box 1.5 could have been tested with a qualitative method like participant observation.

While practical considerations may seem rather mundane and uninteresting compared with the lofty realm inhabited by the philosophical debates surrounding such discussions about epistemology and ontology, they are important ones. All social research is a coming together of the ideal and the feasible. Because of this, there will be many circumstances in which the nature of the topic or of the subjects of an investigation and the constraints on a researcher loom large in decisions about how best to proceed.

K KEY POINTS

- **Quantitative and qualitative research constitute different approaches to social investigation and carry with them important epistemological and ontological considerations.**
- **Theory can be depicted as something that precedes research (as in quantitative research) or as something that emerges out of it (as in qualitative research).**
- **Epistemological considerations loom large in considerations of research strategy. To a large extent, these revolve around the desirability of employing a natural science model (and in particular positivism) versus interpretivism.**
- **Ontological considerations, concerning objectivism versus constructionism, also constitute important dimensions of the quantitative/qualitative contrast.**
- **Values may impinge on the research process at different times.**
- **Practical considerations in decisions about research methods are also important factors.**
- **Feminist researchers have tended to prefer a qualitative approach, though there is some evidence of a change of viewpoint in this regard.**

Q QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

Theory and research

- If you had to conduct some social research now, what would the topic be and what factors would have influenced your choice? How important was addressing theory in your consideration?
- Outline, using examples of your own, the difference between grand and middle-range theory.
- What are the differences between inductive and deductive theory and why is the distinction important?

Epistemological considerations

- What is meant by each of the following terms: positivism; realism; and interpretivism? Why is it important to understand each of them?
- What are the implications of epistemological considerations for research practice?

Ontological considerations

- What are the main differences between epistemological and ontological considerations?
- What is meant by objectivism and constructionism?
- Which theoretical ideas have been particularly instrumental in the growth of interest in qualitative research?

Research strategy: quantitative and qualitative research

- Outline the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of: the relationship between theory and data; epistemological considerations; and ontological considerations.
- To what extent is quantitative research solely concerned with testing theories and qualitative research with generating theories?

Influences on the conduct of social research

- What are some of the main influences on social research?