# Introduction

## 1.1 Curiosity as a Human Trait

For as long as you can remember you have wanted to find out more about the world around you, and so have we. It's a human trait that comes with being born with a large brain, few instincts, and a vast culture to be learnt.

As children, we want to know more about both the natural world (Will the pile of bricks stand up or topple over?) and the social world. (How can I get Margaret to be my friend? How can I persuade my parents to let me ride my bike to the shopping mall so that I can go skateboarding in the carpark?)

There are practical reasons for wanting to find out about the world – people who know how it works can operate in it more effectively. All human beings in all cultures have to learn about their natural and social worlds if they are to grow up to be competent adults. But we also enjoy gratifying our curiosity. Curiosity-driven inquiry may vary with different cultures but it has blossomed since the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the rise of science as a social institution.

Much of our own informal finding out in everyday social life is driven by the need to know what is going on so that we can figure out what to do next, but some is motivated by the desire to understand something for its own sake and to know more, just because knowledge is more satisfying than ignorance. Formal social research can also be driven by the simple desire for knowledge but it has practical aspects too, including the need to design good social policies that will help more people to lead satisfying lives.

## 1.2 Informal Social Research as a Way of Life

Finding out more about the properties of the natural world, such as acceleration, gravity and momentum, helps with learning to manage the skateboard and the bike. We put time into acquiring this knowledge, often

through trial and error, practice, and hard experience. Our informal social research is also based on practice and observation and we put a lot of effort into this as well.

Robin Dunbar, in *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, presents research on what people talk about in casual conversation. His evidence shows that, for about two-thirds of the time, we are talking about other people. If you wanted to be unkind, you could call it *gossip*, as he does. But Dunbar goes on to argue that, rather than being sinful and wicked, gossip is a key factor allowing large-scale human groups to keep on going.[1] He also says that fiction and biographies outsell most other kinds of books because they feed our craving to know more about how other people function and how they cope with social experiences, and that this desire of ours explains the heavy emphasis on human-interest stories in the mass media.[2]

Indeed, Dunbar's theory of the evolution of language is this. We didn't develop language because talking allowed us to coordinate hunting groups more effectively, and we didn't develop it because it allowed us to exchange mythical stories about our tribe's origins and its relationships with the gods. Language has a more homely origin. 'Language evolved to allow us to gossip'.[3] Whether he's right on that point is, of course, open to debate but it does seem that in everyday life we all do a lot of informal social research. We work out who's friends with whom, who's done what and why (and whether that was a good thing), and what we think other people are likely to do next. So none of us are strangers to social research. We've been doing it informally most of our lives.

## 1.3 A Definition of Research

What's different about formal, or systematic, social research? Systematic social research involves two main stages:

1 Developing theories that link concepts in such a way that we can explain something that puzzles us. As an example of such a theory, consider this statement: 'In a situation of economic crisis, if social capital is high, ethnic conflict will be less likely to occur'.
2 Searching for evidence that will allow us to test these links and to evaluate the explanations they offer. In the above example this would include defining *economic crisis*, defining and measuring *social capital* and deciding whether any conflict that might occur is *ethnically based* or not.

The key words in the two-stage outline of systematic research given above are *theories*, *concepts* and *evidence*. We will begin with evidence and work backwards through concepts to theory.

## 1.4 Social Research in Everyday Life

You already know how to develop theories that link concepts, and look for evidence for these links, because informal social research works in a similar fashion, so we'll look first at informal research and then explore the ways in which systematic social research refines the principles of its informal cousin and builds on them.

### 1.4.1 Characteristics of everyday research

In research in everyday life, evidence tends to be based on observation, hearsay and authority; concepts emerge out of daily experiences; and the theories that link the concepts are often not explicitly stated.

#### Evidence is based on observation, hearsay and authority

What counts as evidence in informal research? We believe the evidence of our own eyes and evidence based on our own experience. If we see the new neighbour chopping down the trees in his back yard, we think, 'Mr So-and-so is not a tree-lover'. (We might be wrong. He could be merely clearing the ground so that he can plant a new mini-rainforest.) But we can't be everywhere all of the time observing what other people do, and we generally place a lot of credence in what most people think, or in what a small group of our friends think, or in what a trusted authority thinks. Who that trusted authority is will vary with the context. It might be a popular member of the peer group, or an older relative, or a community leader (for example a spokesperson for a community action group or political party, such as Noel Pearson or Bob Brown, a financial wizard such as George Soros, a sporting hero such as Cathy Freeman, a pop star, or a minister of religion).

Authorities do matter, but most of the time informal groups of friends have more clout. We see more of them and they talk to us more than distant authorities do. When we conclude that 'Most people think Jane can't be trusted; she's not loyal to her friends', or 'Most people think Mark is a good bloke', we are usually working on the judgments of a small group of people. What 'most people' think can be a useful rule of thumb, but it may be wrong. Jane could be being white-anted by her enemies; Mark may have a good line in impression management.

Indeed Dunbar argues that as well as using language for gossip, we also use it for self-advertisement. When we dwell on the dreadful misdeeds of other people, we are usually quick to say, or imply, that *we* would *never* do a thing like that.

When we are conducting informal 'research', what our friends think, or what a reliable authority says, strikes us as pretty good evidence and, most of the time, it is. It's not foolproof but, usually, there's not a great deal at stake. Is Mark really a good bloke? Is Margaret really lots of fun? If your information is incorrect and you invite Mark or Margaret to your party and they turn out to be drunken boors, the consequences are not usually catastrophic. Our informal strategies work most of the time and, if they don't, it's not a disaster. We use these strategies because we don't have time to analyse every single individual independently on his or her own merits. A bit of gossip or informal social research is a great time-saver.

## Concepts emerge out of everyday life

When we are figuring out the interesting details about other people's behaviour and characters, we have to employ general concepts. We've used some already: trustworthy, good bloke, fun-loving, loyal friend. These are general characteristics that people may display.

You'll be able to think of a raft of others – good listener, anxious, self-obsessed, lazy, vain, good trier, brave and so on. We use concepts like these to organise our thoughts and ideas but, in everyday life, these concepts seem to come to us naturally. It's one of the background, taken-for-granted assumptions of our culture that people are likely to display such characteristics. We don't put much active thought into what the concepts involved actually mean. (And the concepts can be *culture-bound*. Maybe loyalty means something different for members of a tribe of hunter–gatherers in the Amazon jungle than it does for urban Australians, and maybe the tribal people wouldn't understand what we mean by *self-obsessed*.)

## Theory is not explicitly stated

Theories link concepts. When we are developing our theories about Mark and Margaret (or some other person of our acquaintance) we might say, 'Margaret seems to be a good listener, but actually I think she's quite self-obsessed and just pretends to be interested in other people to get them to like her', or 'Mark makes out that he doesn't do any work, but I think he's rather anxious to do well and studies more than he lets on'.

We use theories to link our concepts in order to interpret and explain people's behaviour, but in most cases the theories that we use when we do informal social research are not explicitly stated. We are probably operating from taken-for-granted theories about human nature, such as: most people want to be admired and popular; most people want to be successful; most people want to be rich; most people want to be sexually attractive. And these ideas allow us to make

predictions about how people with certain qualities will behave. In the above examples we could say that Margaret and Mark are both using impression management to achieve goals that are important to them – popularity in Margaret's case and the appearance of effortless success in Mark's.

We believe that we know what other people want to achieve, and our judgments about their character (whether they are trustworthy or not) help us to explain why they did what they did yesterday and what they are likely to do tomorrow. Will they cheat and take shortcuts in order to pursue popularity and prestige, or will they keep their word and behave honourably, despite temptations to betray a friend or lie in order to reach a short-term goal?

We tend to take these background theories about human nature so much for granted that we don't realise that we are employing theories when we use them. And if our predictions turn out to be wrong, we're not particularly fussed. We can usually explain it away, saying, 'OK, Jane (who *never* keeps secrets) kept the secret this time. But that's because Con was listening and she's trying to impress him'.

## 1.5 Systematic Social Research

As we study systematic social research we are engaged in making a transition, learning how to move on from useful, rule-of-thumb, everyday ways of finding out. These methods work much of the time but they can go badly wrong some of the time. Systematic social research offers more reliable, more defensible ways of following our curiosity to new and more useful, more wide-ranging, truths.

### 1.5.1 Who does it?

Everyone does informal research but not everyone does systematic social research. But it is surprising how many people do do it, and do need to know how to do it. It's not just academics in university departments, but policy analysts in business and government, media producers, advisers to political parties, market researchers and members of voluntary associations.

Journalists and producers who want to write articles or develop effective radio or television programs need to know the principles of systematic social research. The same applies to people who want to produce marketing plans that work, or business plans that convince banks to grant loans to their companies. Community activists who want funding for programs to combat homelessness or drug addiction, political advisers working on new policy ideas, members of an environmental group working on a strategy to recruit new members – all of these people will be more effective if they move beyond the world of gossip and into the world of systematic research.

Anyone who wants to influence serious people by presenting serious ideas needs to understand the principles of systematic social research.

## 1.5.2 The main differences between informal and formal research

One main difference between informal and formal research is that informal research is often based on ideas about individual people, while formal research is based on ideas about categories of people in similar situations. But when we look at the nuts and bolts, we can see that the key difference is this: while both approaches use theories to link concepts in order to interpret or explain something, and both approaches test their theories against the evidence, the steps involved are much more explicit in formal research.

### Evidence is relevant and objective (empirical)

Informal social research is based on evidence gathered from casual conversation or from advice offered by trusted authority figures, but we know that it can sometimes be badly mistaken. We've seen this in the natural sciences. Once upon a time everyone thought the world was flat. Chatting in the taverns of fourteenth-century Europe would only have confirmed this impression. Flat was in. But flat was wrong. So systematic researchers don't consider that 'Everyone else believes this to be true' is a good reason for them to accept a claim as true.

In systematic research evidence must be objective. This means it must be based on something more than hearsay. It must be based on relevant evidence that is *available for scrutiny* by other people besides ourselves. (The word *objective* has a number of meanings but here we're using it in the sense of being available to the eyes and ears of others. To talk of *objective evidence* is another way of saying *empirical evidence*.)[4]

The need to use objective evidence is not limited to formal research projects. For example, when you are writing an essay in politics, sociology, English literature or any other serious subject, you are developing an argument (a theory) and testing it against the evidence. If your argument is to be convincing, the evidence must be objective. This means that your readers need to know what that evidence is and where it comes from, hence the need for referencing. (Actually there are two reasons for referencing: one is the need to show that are you using objective evidence, the other is avoiding plagiarism.)

The claim 'Most people believe X' or 'Most people don't question X' does not count as strong evidence in systematic social research. People may be mistaken in their beliefs, and audiences may have other things to do than raise

questions about our claims to truth. Arguing from authority doesn't count either. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle said that some men were, by their innate nature, born to be slaves and others were, by their innate nature, born to be masters of slaves: '[some] are marked out from the moment of birth to rule or be ruled'.[5] Aristotle was a genius, an outstanding philosopher and political theorist, and the father of the natural sciences, but that doesn't make him an authority whose word will substitute for empirical evidence. Today we don't believe that some people are naturally born to be slaves, and the fact that Aristotle says they are doesn't sway us one bit.

Systematic research is sceptical about authorities as sources of evidence. If we are taking the sceptical approach, we listen respectfully to the authorities but we do not accept their claims as truth without further evidence.

So what does count as evidence in systematic research? There is an almost infinite number of objective facts that researchers can draw on. There are the results of sociological studies, government statistics, historical events, published biographies, letters, photographs, family histories, records of Parliamentary debates and so on. All of these are evidence. However, whether or not a source will count as evidence depends on the researcher's purposes. It will depend on the theory he or she is developing.

Some sources, such as the Census, describe whole populations. Others, such as in-depth studies of adolescent friendship networks, describe small groups or individuals. Whether this matters depends on the work the researcher wants them to do. Evidence that cultural conflict is making one migrant schoolgirl unhappy is valid evidence about her state of mind for someone who is writing her biography. But if they were to use it to document a claim that all (or most) migrant schoolgirls were unhappy, they would be guilty of generalising from insufficient data. The crucial questions to ask about evidence are these:

1 Is it relevant? (Does it connect with the concepts in the theory that is being explored?)
2 Is it valid and reliable evidence? (Is the connection a good connection?)
3 Can other people get access to it and check that it has been used properly? (Is it objective?)

For example, David Cottle has claimed that guilt over the past makes Australia to this very day 'a grotesque unworthy place of moral torment and decay'.[6] Is Australia really a grotesque unworthy place of moral torment and decay? The fact that one person thinks so is not in itself convincing evidence for what Australia is really like. If we were working on a theory that the quality of life in Australia was improving (or deteriorating), this person's

statement would not be particularly relevant. But if we were writing his biography, and developing a theory that he tended to be deeply depressed about the past, it would be relevant. It would also be objective. Because he'd written it down, other people could go to the article and check that we hadn't just made it up. This makes the statement objective evidence. (The second point about validity and reliability is explained in Section 2.1.)

It should be pretty clear to you whether a piece of evidence is objective or not. The key test is this: can someone else look at this evidence besides myself? But we can't really answer the question of whether the evidence is relevant or not without thinking about the role of concepts and theories. What counts as relevant evidence will depend on the work you want that evidence to do, and you can only know what you require of it when your theory is explicitly stated and your concepts are defined.

### Concepts may come from everyday life, but they also may come from other research

If you are a social science student, you will have already met a number of concepts that you may not have come across before. Think of Goffman's notion of impression management (and *expressions given* versus *expressions given off*),[7] or the idea of social closure,[8] or Taylorism and Fordism,[9] or ethnocentrism,[10] or market situation.[11]

Sometimes coming to grips with a new concept can suggest a range of new theories and ideas to us, partly because it helps us see our everyday life in a new way. The idea of social capital, mentioned above in the sample theory about the effects of economic crises on interethnic relations (Section 1.3), is such a concept.

What is social capital? It is the prevalence of norms upholding honesty, promise-keeping, and meeting obligations to others. It promotes interpersonal trust and helps people to cooperate with each other without overt coercion and, unlike most other forms of capital, the more it is used the more it grows.[12]

Where social capital is high, parents contribute to the fund for the new school library, even though it will not be finished before their child leaves. Where it is low, a parent would be a softheaded fool to do such a thing. Where it is high, people join a working bee to care for a local park. Where it is low, they dump their household rubbish in the park. In societies with high social capital, small children may be sent on errands in safety, elderly people can use public transport in safety and, if a car breaks down, other drivers stop and help. In societies with low social capital, vulnerable family members stay at home behind locked security doors, and motorists who seem to be in distress are really bandits hoping to rob us. When social

capital is high, people are honest and businesses are more profitable because their transaction costs are lower. When social capital is low, corruption is widespread and it is difficult for market economies to function.

If you think social capital is a useful concept, then you could start thinking about the habits, practices and policies that might help it grow and those that might deplete it. This means that you'd be developing theories about social capital, theories that linked it to other concepts, perhaps to economic globalisation or cultural pluralism or tolerance or homelessness. And you'd look for evidence that was relevant to the concepts as you had used them in these theories.


## Theory is explicitly stated

This leads us to the third difference between everyday informal social research and systematic social research. In systematic social research the concepts are not taken for granted. They are explicitly defined. And the theory (or idea, opinion, argument) that links them is also clearly stated. It's not implied, as is so often the case in casual conversation. It's laid on the table for everyone to look at.

## 1.6 Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Section 1.3 pointed out that systematic research involved two main stages. But now that we've thought a little more about concepts, we can see that there are really three:

1 Think your argument through – state the theory that links concepts in order to explain an aspect of reality.
2 Define the concepts.
3 Find some evidence relevant to the concepts that allows you to put your theory to the test.

When you have worked through the first two stages, you are in a situation to look for evidence that is relevant and objective.

Maybe you could investigate theories about social capital by walking up and down the streets and counting the number of houses with security doors and bars on the windows. Maybe you could first find out from the Census how many children aged five to twelve lived in an area, and then hang around and see how many were out playing in the street, how many walked to school with their friends and how many were driven by their parents, even though the school was close.

Or you could go to the local council and see how many clubs and societies operated in the area. Are there active youth groups and sporting associations? Is there a drama society? Is there a woodworkers' group? Is there a society for growing native plants? Is there a pigeon fanciers' club? Do people volunteer to help with Meals on Wheels? And so on. All of these methods would produce *quantitative* data, evidence that can be expressed as numbers. For example, you might find that there were 38 clubs and associations and that 52 per cent of the population aged 15 or more belonged to at least one of them.

If you wanted to explore how they felt about the associations they belonged to, or why the non-joiners stayed away, you might adopt a different approach. Perhaps you'd conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews or try to run a focus group. Such methods are called *qualitative*. The researcher analyses the results by looking for themes in people's accounts of their experiences, and presents his or her findings in words rather than numbers.

Much fruitful and interesting work is produced by qualitative researchers but, as its title makes clear, this book is about analysing the results of quantitative research. We will go on to discuss social research methods based on analysing secondary data and survey data, and will emphasise stage three of the research process. To say that we are finding evidence relevant to our key

concepts, evidence that will allow us to test an idea or a theory, is another way of saying that we are analysing data.

The Further Reading section at the end of the book lists titles that will take you further with research design and, while secondary data and surveys tend to dominate the field as far as quantitative methods are concerned, they by no means monopolise it. Read Alan Kellehear's book *The Unobtrusive Researcher: A Guide to Methods* for a range of less typical approaches.

## 1.7 Differences Between Social Science and Natural Science

Everything we've said so far about systematic research applies to the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy and so on) just as much as it does to social research. There are, however, two main differences between the natural and the social sciences.

First, natural scientists hope that, through their research, they'll be able to uncover the fundamental laws of nature, and they have already found quite a few of these: the law of gravity, the laws of thermodynamics, the principle of general relativity and so on. Social scientists aim to interpret and explain particular events and trends, such as patriotism, crime, changes in fertility rates, race riots, attitudes to tariffs, the spread of new technology, patterns of urban development and housing trends, but we don't expect to find unchanging social laws that always apply everywhere. We don't expect to be able to say that whenever a country hits financial trouble, ethnic scapegoating will invariably take place, or that whenever social capital is high, crime rates will always be low. We'd expect these trends to occur often but we wouldn't say that they will invariably occur in the same way that a heavy weight dropped from a tall building must always hit the ground. There are two reasons for this.

One of these is that there are many more variables involved in most social situations than there are in a controlled experiment in physics. Think of trying to define all of the relevant concepts in a major strike, compared to some of the natural science experiments you may have done at school. But that's not the whole story. There are a lot of variables involved in the weather but meteorologists still try to predict it. This is obviously hard work. All of those atoms and molecules in the atmosphere are being buffeted about by many different forces, and many of these forces interact with each other, so it really is very hard to predict whether it will rain tomorrow or not. There are many concepts involved. But the weather forecaster does often get it right. (The words *concept* and *variable* can share the same meaning because most concepts can vary – social capital can be high or low, and crime may be

prevalent or rare – but see Section 2.1.3 for a discussion of situations where concepts are not variables.)

Now consider how much harder it would be for the meteorologists if the molecules in the atmosphere could think. What if the air molecules could decide whether or not they were going to let wind knock them around or whether they were going to stand and fight? What if they could make an active choice about whether they were going to take up water molecules? What if the water molecules could decide if they would try to be rain, hail or sleet?

In a complex social situation there are many concepts influencing us, and we are often aware of this. We can stop and think, and decide not to move in the direction in which social pressure seems to be pushing us. Human beings can reflect and change what they do. This makes it impossible for social scientists to find invariable social laws that will always determine what people will do. But it also makes social science exciting. It may lack the universal laws that the natural scientists treasure, but this very lack means that society is flexible. Social science may be able to change social reality. Natural science cannot change natural reality.

If we can understand how ethnic scapegoating works, we can try to prevent it, and if we understand what helps social capital to grow, we can try to produce more of it. The human atoms think and learn, and we can help them (and ourselves) to understand the atmospheric forces creating the social climate so that we can all enjoy happier weather.

## 1.8 Scepticism

The clearest hallmark of the systematic approach to social research is scepticism. Be sceptical of what 'everyone thinks' and be sceptical of the authorities. If you put your ideas to a fair test, use clear concepts and check your theories against relevant and objective evidence, you can argue with both received wisdom and the authorities. You can test your opinions against those of the textbooks and those put forward by your lecturers and tutors. In the world of everyday informal research we often hold back and refrain from questioning other people's ideas, either because we don't want to hurt their feelings or because they are in a superior position to us and we don't want to be rude.

But another difference between the informal world and the formal world is that, in the latter, truth is a higher value than politeness. You can question the great and the good if you want to. Politeness *is* important but the ideal of finding out how things really work takes precedence over immaculate good manners and deference to rank.

## Notes

1 R. Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, pp. 4–5, 7, 175–6.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

4 See K. Betts and A. Seitz, *Writing Essays and Research Reports in the Social Sciences*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 88–91.

5 Aristotle, *The Politics* (translated by H. Rackham), William Heinemann: The Loeb Classical Library, London, 1932, p. 19. He also writes that '...all men that differ as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal...these are by nature slaves...[A]lso the usefulness of slaves diverges little from that of animals', pp. 21, 23.

6 D. Cottle, 'Review of M. Aarons' *Sanctuary: Nazi Refugees in Australia*', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1991, pp. 76–7. He is referring to his beliefs about Australians' attitudes to Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

7 *Impression management* is Goffman's term for the effort we go to in presenting ourselves to others. He argues that this effort is concentrated on the expressions we 'give', aspects of our self-presentation that are under our conscious control (such as the clothes we wear and the words we speak), but that these are always vulnerable to sabotage from the expressions we 'give off', those aspects of our self-presentation that are not under our conscious control (such as inappropriate clothes chosen in ignorance or lapses of grammar). See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969.

8 The concept of *social closure* is derived from Weber's theory of community. (A good account can be found in Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, Tavistock, London, 1979.) It refers to a group's efforts to close ranks and monopolise resources to the exclusion of outsiders. Examples include efforts to enforce *endogamy* (only allowing marriage to other members of the group), denying outsiders access to jobs in ethnic businesses, and maintaining the rules of membership in exclusive clubs.

9 *Fordism* and *Taylorism* refer to the methods of organising work along assembly-line principles pioneered by Henry Ford and analysed and promoted by Frederick Winslow Taylor. (See Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, 3rd edn, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 309–10.)

10 *Ethnocentrism* means considering one's own ethnic group to be the standard-setter for others, and automatically assuming that the values of one's own group are inherently superior. Aristotle (*op. cit.*, p. 27) provides an example from Athens in the fourth century BC when he writes that, '[O]ur nobles consider themselves noble not only in their own country but everywhere, but they think that barbarian noblemen are only noble in their own country'.

11 *Market situation* is another Weberian term (see Parkin, *op. cit.*). A person's market situation is strong if, first, there is a demand for their skills, and second, they are able to organise others who already have these skills in such a way as to restrict the ability of outsiders to acquire them or to use them. Examples include unions that manage to enforce the principle of a closed shop ('No-one may work for this firm unless they have a union ticket') and members of professional associations who can persuade Parliament to pass laws saying that a person may not practise their profession without a lengthy formal education and professional accreditation. People whose market situation is weak either have few marketable skills or are unable to exclude competitors from their market niche.

12 See R. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1993, pp. 167, 169, 176; F. Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, The Free Press, New York, 1999, pp. 27–8, 235.