Chapter 1

The Craft of Inquiry

From the origins of the discipline to the most recent scholarship, a gap has widened between theory and method in the discipline’s self-understanding of what it means to “do” sociology. Much work in the discipline today consists of abstract theoretical speculations, methodological analyses of the properties of various statistics, or rigorous empirical analyses that lack theoretical substance.

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1959 characterized this intellectual division of labor as “grand theory” versus “abstracted empiricism” in his classic work *The Sociological Imagination*. For Mills, “grand theorists” like Talcott Parsons were committed to theory without evidence while “abstracted empiricists” such as Paul Lazarsfeld practiced method without theory. Although Mills overstated his critique of both Parsons and Lazarsfeld for polemical purposes, he accurately focused on their all too frequent failure to integrate theories, methods, and evidence. (Mills failed to make the further distinction between method and research.) Addressing this problem, institutional statesmen like Columbia University’s Robert K. Merton advocated “middle-range theory” that could mediate between the camps of theory and method. While this formulation helped avoid a civil war between theorists and methodologists, Merton’s strategy smooths over rather than confronts directly the intellectual issues raised by the specializations in theory, methodology, and empirical research in sociology.

THEORY VS. METHOD VS. RESEARCH

“Theory” has become a specialty in its own right, with examinations, courses, and journals. Critical consideration of the categories of discourse is thriving within sociology. The effect of the cognitive separation of theory from method, sanctioned by academic specialization, is that theorists do not deal with the re
lationship of theory to evidence. They ignore the empirical foundations that would support or negate their ideas or, when evidence is a central issue, deal with it primarily in philosophical terms. The resulting divorce of theory from evidence leads, on the one hand, to ever more complex conceptual elaborations and, on the other, to empirical research that is often insufficiently linked to theoretical claims. The arbitrary distinction between theorists and methodologists obscures the full range of available theoretical and empirical choices.

The specialization in theory is even enshrined in dictionaries. The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought (1993) pays no attention to problems of method or evidence, except as theoretical categories. There are no entries for “evidence,” “data,” and “quantification” and only a brief article on “method” (by the French sociologist Raymond Boudon) and on “statistics”; these are seen as theoretical issues.

“Method,” broadly viewed, is a series of strategies for finding a way to associate the abstractions of theory with the actual social relations being mapped, interpreted, or explained by the theory. Techniques for collecting, verifying, and evaluating the validity and reliability of specific kinds of evidence constitute the narrow meaning of “method” and comprise the skills usually taught in methods courses. How to assess the biases in a historical document, how to reduce error in coding, how to do a regression analysis, how to guard against “over-interpretation” in a field study are indispensable techniques for gathering and evaluating evidence, but they are not my concern here.

Methodology has also become a subfield, with specialists offering courses, giving papers, and publishing in professional journals. The writing of methodologists as one-sided as those of the theorists: Books on methodology typically pay little attention to the way that categories of analysis are theoretically constructed, and they ignore the assumptions that underlie particular ways of gathering, aggregating, and analyzing the data. These issues are left to the theorists, who don’t deal with them.

Methodologists who focus on statistical techniques, interviewing skills, coding procedures, rapport in field work, or archival search strategies also perpetuate this misleading distinction by not acknowledging the theoretical assumptions implicit in ways of gathering or creating evidence. Even some methodologists who complain that particular statistical techniques are used inappropriately sometimes neglect the theoretical sources of particular technical procedures.

Methodologists are usually divided into quantitative and qualitative specialists. Quantitative methodologists are further specialized into applied and theoretical statisticians. Qualitative methodologies divide into ethnographers, symbolic interactionists, grounded theorists, historical methodologists, and ethnographers, each with a specialized vocabulary and set of techniques.

The intellectual division of labor within sociology is also represented by “researchers” who analyze substantive problems defined as part of the subfields of social stratification, political sociology, the family, education, the sociology of organizations—subfields that deal with one or another social institution. Researchers call on theoretical assumptions to frame and justify their research questions and rely on established methodological tools to answer the question.

These established divisions of intellectual labor among “theorists,” “methodologists,” and “researchers” have a built-in inertia that stems from institutionalized powers to reward specialization and punish interdisciplinary work. Ironically, works that are honored with awards for the best scholarship are frequently those that combine multiple paradigms of inquiry. Practitioners in the field recognize excellent interdisciplinary scholarship, even while they themselves have powerful incentives to stay within their disciplinary specialization.

THEORY, METHODS, AND EVIDENCE IN THE CLASSIC CANON

I have chosen works by Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx to exemplify the integration of theory and method as well as the creative use of multiple paradigms of inquiry. Each of them accepts as theoretical premises key elements of each paradigm, although foregrounding one of them in the particular work I analyze.

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx all assumed that there is a continuous interplay between theoretical assumptions and the objects of inquiry. “Theory” and “method” form moments, as it were, within the process of inquiry. To put the point another way, they assumed that theories do refer to a reality outside themselves and that the relationship between theoretical abstracts and that reality is eternally problematic.

The classic thinkers also realized the importance of understanding the conscious actions of human actors in historical situations in which actors are embedded in multiple social relations, whether defined as a community, a group, a complex organization, a class, a political party, a marriage, or a religious or ethnic group. The distinctive forms of social relations indicated by these categories are the meaningful context within which actors construct their own identities.

The three thinkers also took for granted that there are empirical regularities of human behavior, human perceptions, and human experience that it is the distinctive task of social inquiry to investigate and explain. Recurring patterns of human experience and their association with features of social structure and history can be known. If human experiences in history were totally chaotic, random, and arbitrary, there would be nothing to investigate.

Their theories were grounded in historical and empirical evidence and attempted to answer quite concrete questions. Their works, by implication, thus challenge current definitions of theorizing as an activity disconnected from empirical inquiry. It is striking how little of their work is, in the modern sense, self-consciously theoretical.

Their works have inspired methodological discussions about how to connect evidence to our theories. Durkheim’s concept of the “social fact” as an
ties, and organizations but as an emergent phenomenon that has its own reality. Societies faced with multiple social divisions. Racial and ethnic and religious units of analysis, seen not as an aggregation of individuals, groups, communities, and organizations but as an emergent phenomenon that has its own reality independent of "lower" levels of social existence. Whether society is defined as "capitalism" and seen as polarized by class conflict or as "modern society" and seen as a differentiated congeries of groups with specialized functions ("organic solidarity") or as dominated by potentially rational bureaucratic organizations, the societal environment was always the theoretical context for the development of arguments.

Although mainstream sociological research rarely cites any of these thinkers anymore—a maturing science is supposed to forget its ancestors—the perspectives they brought to bear on society still inform our outlooks on how a society is organized and how it changes. These works are our common intellectual heritage. The paradigms of inquiry that sociologists use to construct theoretical claims and empirical generalizations were institutionalized within the discipline with the canonization of the classic nineteenth-century writings of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Their texts have shaped our sociological consciousness by shaping the definitions of important theoretical and empirical questions. Many of their concepts have disappeared into the assumptions that underlie contemporary work. Their impact is all the greater for having become implicit.

What continues to attract scholars to the work of these classic thinkers is that each attempted in his own way to provide insight into the social totality and each made use of multiple paradigms of inquiry. While none of them had the advantage of contemporary theoretical and empirical tools, each still analyzed historical processes, patterns of structural relations, and cultural meanings to create explanations for the society being transformed around them.

SOLIDARITY, RATIONALITY, AND PRODUCTION

The classic theorists of sociology are also still relevant because—despite the profound social changes of the past century—we still live in a world that has some of the characteristics they analyzed. Durkheim, Weber, and Marx each analyzed the simultaneously progressive and yet crisis-prone character of modern societies. Such societies exhibit enormous economic productivity, scientific progress, and technological innovation, as well as gradually expanding democratic institutions and ideals of justice and freedom. Nonetheless, racial and class inequality, injustice, lack of opportunity, political repression, and ethnic and racial violence and prejudice continue to exist. Modern societies are still subject to the crises of solidarity analyzed by Durkheim, the crises of rationality emphasized by Weber, and the crises of production that were central for Marx. And, most relevant for my argument, these crises are seen in the institutions of social science and the production of teachers, students, and knowledge. A brief sketch, focusing on how central theoretical assumptions lead to research questions, is in order.

Émile Durkheim saw modern societies as subject to crises of solidarity: a breakdown of the common values and sense of community needed to integrate societies faced with multiple social divisions. Racial and ethnic and religious
conflict, the high incidence of divorce, the breakdown of family life, the disruption of stable jobs and careers—all these fit Durkheim’s image of the pathological destruction of community and the pervasiveness of anomie: Life is no longer predictable.

Social science is one of the differentiated functions that helps integrate a complex division of labor into the “organic solidarity” envisioned by Durkheim by producing knowledge with social uses, as well as social roles (teachers, students, researchers) whose practitioners carry out the necessary functions. In normal times, students can make a series of decisions about courses and majors that will prepare them for stable careers and that enable them to count on finding a niche appropriate to their interests, talents, and skills.

But social science is not exempt from crises of solidarity, manifest in an anomie division of labor among departments, fields, and universities, as well as a forced division of labor as teaching loads increase for young scholars unable to work in their specialties. Occupational groups—such as the professoriate—are increasingly unable to provide the moral certainty of contributing to a valued social function. For students, anomie may occur if their major can no longer be counted on to prepare them for a good job.

Possible research questions might be: What are the consequences of the changing status and social role of different academic disciplines for the career choices of students? How much of a lag is there between the occurrence of changes in the labor market and a change in the self-conceptions of students? How much anomie is produced by the disruption of stable career paths?

Note that these questions are not yet empirical ones. That is, the kinds of evidence potentially available to answer them could vary tremendously. You could ask: How do private and public universities that differ in prestige compare with respect to changes in graduation rates and the proportion of students who choose particular majors? You could ask, of a sample of graduates: What was the salary of your first job? Was it in the field of your college major? You could do a historical study and ask: What have been the different sources of funding of universities (private donations, tax monies, research grants) since World War II? Has declining public funding led to pressures to reduce support for the humanities and social sciences and to increase it for work in technical fields and in the traditional professions?

These are only a few of the possible research implications of Durkheim’s theory of the division of labor in modern societies and the impact of institutional crisis on academic life.

Max Weber saw industrialized societies, increasingly legitimated by bureaucratic principles of organization, as being in a crisis of rationality, and this foreboding remains relevant. Popular beliefs in public and political accountability have eroded. Opportunistic political leadership abounds. Bureaucratic organizations justify their power with ideologies of efficiency. Weber also saw the dangers of increasing militarism in a world of contending nation states mobilizing virulent ethnic loyalties for nationalist goals. Here I shall deal only with the implications of his theory of rationality for academia.

Social science is rationally organized into bureaucracies (departments, divisions, fields, public and private universities, research foundations) that produce knowledge. For students, this rational organization is manifest in sequences of required courses developed and enforced as a “major.”

But social knowledge is also vulnerable to crises of rationality. “Major” requirements can inhibit a student’s attempt to integrate fragmented knowledge by taking courses in many fields. Similarly, technically competent research is organized by bureaucratized “policy research” agencies that manage staffs of research assistants and generate research grants to keep the organizations going. Such research is likely to be “formally rational”—it conforms to internal criteria for “good” research. Yet, standards for theoretically coherent research on socially important problems (“substantive rationality”) are all too frequently abandoned, sometimes if powerful funders object, sometimes simply because of the requirement to focus on narrow questions that can be answered by highly technical research procedures.

Some possible research questions that flow from this theoretical perspective might be: Does the rise of charismatic fundamentalist religions signify a decline in the legitimacy of science and rational bureaucratic organizations? Is being a “student” as central a personal identity for young people enrolled in college in the 1990s as it was in the 1950s? Empirically (and note the gap): Are sociology majors less religious than business majors? Has the conversation of students “hanging out” in “bull sessions” become focused more on career dilemmas than on philosophical issues and politics over the past twenty years? What is the balance of perceptions among students doing research papers: Is the work only a course requirement? Is it a creative self-identified project to learn something interesting, or just a necessary part of the training for a possible social science career?

Again, these are only a few examples of ways in which Weber’s theoretical perspective can be translated into research questions.
But, the production of social knowledge also exhibits what Marx saw as the fetishism of commodities and an anarchy of production. The contradiction between the new forces of production (computers, statistics, census data, archives) and the social relations of production (the proliferation of part-time adjunct teachers, the overproduction of Ph.D.s, the product differentiation of journals, the pressure to publish) will lead to social crises in which investment in education will shrink, academic unemployment grow, libraries lack the funds to buy books and journals. Certain majors may become almost unemployable.

Research questions flowing from Marx’s theoretical perspective might include: To what extent does competition among university departments for positions, salaries, and grants mimic the model of capital accumulation and profitability in private industry? Is students’ alienation from their work, from other students, from their own goals, analogous to the alienation of workers employed in factories? How necessary is the production of social science knowledge for the continuation of the core institutions of capitalist societies?

Specified empirically (again, remember the gap between theory and evidence), you might ask: What is the relationship between the status and income of a professor and the time he or she spends with students? Does this relationship vary by size of college, the college’s prestige, the class background of the students? Or, to what extent are student research assistants treated as junior colleagues rather than hired labor? In conversations between professors and students, how much emphasis is placed on “training” for a career versus “liberal education” of the mind, versus simply fulfilling course and major requirements? How much change has there been in teaching loads in different types of universities, and is this change correlated with how much students have learned by graduation?

This quick attempt to show how one can restate some of Durkheim’s, Weber’s, and Marx’s canonical theories into research questions relevant to possible contemporary trends in social science is only a background assumption for my argument here. I present this sketch only to suggest how their theories about modern society could be translated into research questions that are potentially testable with methods and evidence. Some of the questions I have posed would be answerable only with an enormous investment of time and resources, but it is important at the early stage of a research project to be playful and experimental. Push the boundaries of possible questions as far as possible before you must become concrete, realistic, and “responsible.”

CONCLUSIONS

The craft of inquiry teaches you how to connect theory to evidence in order to construct valid explanations of the workings of society. Sociology needs to rewire theory, method, and evidence in a way that can be both legitimate and powerful. My core assumption is that how you define a research question and then analyze its theoretical context and its empirical implications significantly influences the trajectory and the quality of your research. Neither sophisticated theory nor high-technology statistics—not even a wealth of data—can create significance from a fuzzy research question.

This book is intended primarily to be a guide to the craft of inquiry, by presenting and illustrating a “working vocabulary” that is useful as a tool for the craft. Its goal is to broaden awareness of the wide range of theoretical and empirical choices available to answer different kinds of research questions. My purpose is not to challenge sociology’s multiple traditions; quite the opposite. Research questions are currently defined in overspecialized ways. Showing the relationships of each paradigm to the others will reveal their full intellectual potential.

Not every possible kind of evidence is necessary to answer a particular research question, nor can you always obtain the resources of time and energy to answer all potentially interesting theoretical and empirical questions. No one can simultaneously survey hundreds of persons (or companies, families, or communities), conduct depth interviews with key informants, search the relevant government archives, and engage in years of participant observation. The author of every published work has selected painfully among many possible lines of inquiry.

There is no one “best” way to combine different kinds of evidence or theory. Sometimes a research question requires a combination of approaches in a single work. Depending on the state of knowledge in the particular field, a diatribal debate between individuals defending simply fulfilling course and major requirements or open up debates about both evidence and theory. At some point, final choices have to be made in order to finish the paper, thesis, or other work. Chapter 2 deals with the practical issues of using the working vocabulary of the craft of inquiry.

Developing coherent arguments that recognize historical processes, symbolic meanings, and multivariate relations is the best way to construct an adequate explanation of a complex social phenomenon. Pushing historical and interpretive methods into the social entities into models based only on quantitatively measured variables may actually prevent an adequate explanation of the processes under study, as I argue in Chapter 7. The process of abstracting from history and from intersubjective meanings into quantitative measured variables guts the analysis of substantive significance. Theory becomes an abstract statement of correlations between variables. Paradoxically, perhaps the very process of attempting to abstract in order to generalize may prevent an understanding of cause. But just as concepts and theoretical arguments should not be reduced to data, neither should evidence be regarded as merely subjective interpretations and social constructions without empirical substance.

Sociological inquiry cannot be converted to a set of formulas that instruct you in “research methods” in the same way that you can write down rules for baking a cake or the formula for mixing hydrogen and oxygen to produce water. Combining theory, method, and evidence in sociology is a craft that must be learned in practice. The working vocabulary I present brings theory and method together again as a way of learning the craft of inquiry.
With C. Wright Mills, my concern is to advance a theoretically informed, empirically grounded, and historically oriented social science that matters for the society outside the academy. This book is an introductory guide for the perplexed and a warning of things to avoid, designed for young social science students embarking on research projects. The craft of social inquiry can be learned only through a theoretically informed analysis of actual research practices.

This book is thus centrally concerned with the complex conditions, internal dynamics and consequences of research choices. Although based on the particular research traditions of sociology, my argument applies to all the social sciences. The main focus is on the research process: the grounds on which theoretical claims and empirical generalizations are constructed from research questions framed within the major paradigms of inquiry available in the social sciences.9

Much conceptual work without empirical content helps to clarify the theoretical bases of the field. Specialists in “theory” are making legitimate and important contributions to the field. Similarly, some sociologists must specialize in the mathematics underlying particular statistical techniques. And the sheer technical problems of defining and measuring “poverty” or “ethnic identity” or “gendered behavior,” for example, and then analyzing the complexities of the data deserve and require specialized training. I am not challenging these divisions of intellectual labor after one makes a decision to specialize in a particular aspect of the profession and the discipline. But they should not be built into the implicit culture of the field—in courses, textbooks, examinations—in a way that precludes exposure to the full range of theoretical and methodological traditions—that is, the different “paradigms of inquiry.” Students must somehow pick their way through the complicated decisions that have to be made in specific research projects, taking into account both available resources and institutional constraints.

Designing a Research Project

No work springs out of thin air; it is a historical product, grounded in the intellectual traditions you have absorbed, in the theories of society you have learned, in the audiences for which you write. But it also reflects a series of choices, almost always made with uncertainty, because, by definition, you do not know enough to make the right choices. Constructing an argument is an emotional as well as a cognitive process, a series of leaps of faith, sometimes grounded in hard evidence, sometimes in sheer speculation. You look about for support and for inspiration from books and articles, from colleagues and friends, from your inner resources of imagination.

Individuals bring to the research process widely varying material, emotional, and intellectual resources. How much time do you have for the project? How much money to buy books? How good is your library? Do you have a job? These mundane questions about material resources decisively affect the potential scope and depth of the project. Networks of colleagues and fellow students as sources of information are another important resource. How extensive your intellectual contacts are is partly a function of how much time and money you have, but not entirely. Emotional resources—your level of commitment to the problem, your capacity to concentrate intensively—are also crucial. Are you comfortable calling strangers on the phone? How long can you sit still poring over dusty archival volumes? Intellectual resources include how many languages you can read and how familiar you are with other cultures.

The injunctions to “Master the literature,” “Formulate a theory,” “Deduce a hypothesis from theory,” “Look for relevant data,” “Ensure validity and reliability of the data,” and “Draw theoretical conclusions from the data” are of very little help in the research process. These Six Commandments of scientific method provide a moral framework akin to “Do not steal,” “Love thy father and thy mother,” “Do not covet thy neighbor’s wife,” or, to quote Robert Fulghum, “Hold hands when crossing the street.” Such maxims are of little help in confronting the ambiguities and complexities of daily life. Similarly,
knowing that you should "Do informant interviews" or "Conduct a regression analysis" does not provide much of a concrete guide to solving the daily dilemmas of research.

From the outside, however, if you have not gone through this process, a published article or book, particularly one that has become a "classic"—one that is assigned in courses and footnoted in other books—assumes an appearance of hard objectivity or an aura of inevitability that obscures its origins. The process of revision and rethinking, of editing and reorganizing, that is an inevitable part of that process is hidden by the smooth marching of words down the page, by the finality of the hard cover, the resounding title, the impressive publisher.

Individual intellectual works are produced within the context of specific institutional arrangements (courses, fields, departments, research organizations, publishers) that establish the legitimate language, the problem, the tools (empirical evidence, methods of inquiry) and the resources needed to carry out the project (library access, time, assistants, data, computers). If the work is to be accepted as a thesis or dissertation or to get published as an article or a book, it must conform to certain standards of writing, of logical presentation, of evidence. It must cite sources and the literature. Human beings associated in what are labeled fields, disciplines, or research programs have developed conceptual frameworks that legitimate the problem and the project.

The intellectual product—the book, article, paper—that results from these complex social processes does not ordain itself. It reveals its own historical origins and context. It is easy to be mystified and to conceive of the product as stemming from one hardworking and intelligent human mind. The closer a field gets to a "science," the more the historical context is concealed and the more the argument of the work seems to be the direct outcome of rational generalizations from evidence.

COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL SOURCES OF ANXIETY

It is striking that the process of inquiry is almost always treated as a series of cognitive choices, not emotional ones. The emotional commitments that underlie the research process are almost never acknowledged. Yet, physical and emotional energies have to be mobilized to carry out the multiple tasks associated with intellectual work. The massive focusing of energy necessary to read the literature, write notes and drafts, talk to colleagues and interview "subjects," and analyze data seem to occur totally divorced from the body. These are only the external manifestations of this mobilization of emotional energy. Even more subtle are the internal mobilizations that must take place: The decisions to enter a field, to choose a problem, to study for years, to commit yourself to writing, involve choices that are often painful and draining. We all "know" that this is true, but little attention is paid to the emotional and physiological requirements for intellectual work, and even less to how these requirements enter into the formulation of the problem and the choice of theory and method.

Anxieties are associated with every stage of a research project. Some of them are necessary, justified, and ultimately enlightening. Others are unnecessary, distracting, and ultimately paralyzing. The intensity of the anxieties depends on what you have already written, how new the project is, how familiar you are with the research literature on the topic, how much time you have or are willing to commit to the project, and whether you have the necessary resources—your own time or the time of a research assistant, money to gather the evidence (whether a survey, documents, interviews, travel to archives), and resources to analyze the data (computer time, transcribing, content analysis, coding). And, of course, you need the emotional commitment and stamina to see the project through to some written product.

These sources of anxiety are real and cannot be wished away or eliminated. The fears associated with these present and future difficulties might be called "first-level panic." You inevitably feel these tensions, and sometimes they are almost necessary to force your full attention on the various decisions that must be made. A research project typically has many stages; first-level panic can occur when a novice researcher compares her confusion and indecision at stage 1—when a research question is being decided—to somebody else's polished product in a journal or book. The authors of that finished work have somehow successfully managed to cover the signs of their own panic, as they struggled to develop their own research question into an informed argument supported by evidence. Thus, this comparison is inappropriate, albeit almost inevitable.

A second type of anxiety, which is unproductive, results from an inappropriate handling of first-level panic. Persistent self-questioning of your choice of problem, your motives, and even your intelligence might be called "second-level panic." If you do not realize that first-level panic stems from the intrinsic complexities of the theoretical and empirical issues, you may start questioning your own competence and commitment to the problem. You may wonder why you picked the project in the first place. In these difficult moments, the research process may lead to a state of mind that some people pay others to help them get rid of: obsession, brooding, withdrawal, even despair. Such emotional states sometimes call for therapy, or at least the loving support of friends and family. Such self-questioning cannot help accomplish the real tasks with which you are confronted in the research process.

The working vocabulary is offered to help the process of research by reducing unproductive stress and wasted resources. You can move back and forth between empirical and theoretical "tracks" of inquiry. If you are temporarily blocked in thinking through your theoretical claims, you can stop and pursue the empirical questions: analyze a table, read through the transcript of an interview, review your field notes, study maps showing the geographical distribution of ethnic groups, reorganize your summaries of documents. Or, if you are baffled by a piece of empirical evidence that does not seem to fit, you can reread your notes on the basic concepts or study the latest articles on the topic.
The working vocabulary will help you cope with the intellectual sources of anxiety by providing some tools to help you think through the research question and other issues associated with your primordial choices. Moments of panic are almost inevitable in any research process. You must learn to be kind to yourself in this complex process of thinking—flexible in adjusting the theory to the available evidence and able to reinterpret the evidence in the light of your changing theoretical ideas.

It is a time to confess that I am just as subject to anxiety about my work as everybody else. My experience leads me to "know" that I will somehow get through the process and finish this book. Because I am dealing with multiple paradigms of inquiry with hotly contested criteria for "good" work, I have been faced with criticisms that have been very hard to meet.

The long list of acknowledgments at the front of the book barely hints at the intensity of collegial reaction to the argument I make within it. At this moment, I am sitting at my computer rereading several inches of accumulated critiques from colleagues and friends who took the time to wade through drafts and to write detailed comments. Some points I have incorporated; others I have neglected; still others I simply cannot deal with in this book. It is too late to rethink my fundamental assumptions, but I have tried to patch some of the potholes.

It is anxiety provoking to realize that I have not justified all of the theoretical claims I make and have provided only a few examples and illustrations at best, rather than systematic evidence. And, if this book were a conventional research report, my own emotional "state of mind" would certainly not be mentioned, as I am doing now. But I think (note the uncertainty still!) that this reflexive comment (apology? explanation? rationalization?) is appropriate here.

SELECTING A PROBLEM

You start a research project with a problem: a theme, an issue, or a concern, which at the beginning of the process is inevitably imprecisely defined for research purposes. Problems grow out of a combination of personal experience (your motives, interests, and life history); problems of the discipline, transmitted through the analytic tools, methods, and theories you have learned; and problems of society, transmitted through your exposure to history, broader social theory, politics, and the media.

Possible problems might include the following: the economic welfare of immigrant workers in Western Europe; the causes of peace negotiations in the Middle East; the fate of homeless people in New York City; the global environmental crisis; the lack of funding for AIDS research; the political movement of disabled persons; the male backlash against feminism; the labeling of young black males as violent; American's economic decline; health care delivery in Canada; the differences in income between men and women who hold comparable jobs; the consequences of sexism for mental health; the relationship between homelessness and racism. The range of potential topics or problems is almost infinite.

A problem is not yet a research question. This point cannot be overemphasized. It is easy to assume that stating a topic or a theme or an issue is equivalent to asking a research question. It is not. A research question is literally a sentence that ends in a question mark and in which every word counts, one that points in two directions—toward the theoretical framework that justifies the question and toward the empirical evidence that will answer it. A research question is a commitment to a way of framing the problem for the research process to begin or continue, since research questions usually change in the course of the project.

Substantive problems must thus be translated into the vocabulary of social inquiry. You must ask yourself: What am I really interested in explaining? Which are the central and which the peripheral aspects of the problem? How can the relevant theoretical claims be justified? What are the necessary and possible kinds of evidence available? Perhaps most important: Why do the project at all—what intellectual, political, and emotional commitments can motivate an arduous, perhaps years-long project? If you want to do something, change something—to further the cause of peace, of equality, of freedom, of justice—or achieve any other goal by means of your research, then you have an action agenda.

Once an action agenda must be translated into both theoretical and empirical questions if research is to be potentially relevant to social action or social policy. Action can be taken without research, of course, but it is more likely to have the desired consequences if the actors have knowledge of historically analogous situations and the potential consequences of action. Research directly focused on policy alternatives, administrative implementation, or popular mobilization will keep the action agenda in the foreground of the research process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AS ENTRY POINTS

The importance of asking the right research question is widely recognized, of course, but is seldom treated as a central issue in the research process. Very few books on either methods or theory deal with how to formulate research questions. The problem—and the appropriate concepts to analyze it—may be assumed to emerge from the data. Formulating research questions commits you to a lengthy process of intellectual work. Since a research project may last for several years, it is easy to flounder, go down dead ends, and become paralyzed with self-doubt. Working out a way of thinking through the choices and some appropriate sequence of tasks will allow you to answer a research question with a comprehensive argument. The process of defining research questions is essential to reasoning about an important issue and the relationship in relation to your own work.
There are two types of research questions: theoretical and empirical. An empirical question is one that is answerable from some kind of evidence or data. It is tempting to start with an empirical question, because it grounds you in a search for concrete evidence without worrying too much about what the answer might mean or what its significance might be. That can be a rational strategy, if you ask yourself frequently about the general significance of the empirical question. A “data-driven” approach has the danger of totally absorbing your intellectual energies in the problems of gathering precise measures and analyzing them with the most technically sophisticated methodologies.

A theoretical question is one that derives from an unresolved general conceptual issue in the field. Examples include: “What explains the universality of gender differences, or of social stratification, or of power relations?” Note that these questions presuppose some empirical or cross-cultural evidence that gives rise to the theoretical issue. The question can also be framed in terms of a theory of gender, class, or power that will then lead to such a study.

Either kind of question can be the entry point into the problem. Let us take the topic of gender inequality as an example of a problem. Suppose you are interested in the general problem of equality between men and women. If you are starting with a concern to reduce the inequalities between the genders in the workplace and at home, you are starting with an action agenda. However, the action question “How can gender inequality be reduced?” cannot be answered as such but must be translated into both theoretical and empirical questions.

You then need to ask yourself: “What is interesting about that problem?” and “Why is that an important topic?” You can answer in several ways, each of which constitutes a different entry point into the research process. A research topic that implies an empirical entry point might be the answer “Because I want to find out if it is true that men have higher incomes than women, even among men and women with similar education and skills.” A research topic that implies a theoretical entry point might be “Because I want to understand why the same pattern of gender inequality (“patriarchy”) exists in both wealthy and poor societies, in both traditional and modern cultures.”

If you have observed in your own experience that women do more housework than men, you may wonder what happens if the wife is working and the husband is not. The question “Do unemployed men do more housework than employed men?” is an empirical entry point into the problem. (See the discussion of The Second Shift by Arlie Hochschild in Chapter 5.)

But suppose you have been reading some “human capital” theory in economics and “gender identity” theory in women’s studies. Your entry point might be these questions: “Under what conditions do marriages constitute a contract between parties exchanging domestic services for economic support?” Under what conditions do marriages become intimate relationships in which gender identities are displayed and reinforced?” These questions represent theoretical entry points.

The theoretical frame for the empirical question need not be human capital or gender identity theory. The theoretical questions that give significance to empirical observations of gender differences in housework might be “Under what conditions do different organizations of family life produce different personalities in male and female children?” “What are the relationships among work, leisure, and emotional life in modern families?” or “What are the different ways in which labor power is reproduced in capitalist societies?” Conversely, if your entry point is the theoretical question “What are the conditions under which human capital-versus-gender identity theories are valid,” a wide variety of kinds of evidence will be relevant, in addition to (or instead of) gender differences in housework. You might ask, “What are gender differences in promotion rates in different industries?” or “How do men and women calculate the relative attractiveness of potential sexual partners?” or “How frequently do male and female doctors interrupt male and female patients?” Such empirical studies might in different ways cast some light on the theoretical issues raised by human capital or feminist theories. After that, whatever knowledge you have gained of the conditions under which gender inequality is reproduced may allow you to generalize about possible paths of action to change that situation. Your research thus responds to your action agenda.

Formulating research questions therefore involves a sequence of choices. The vocabulary I offer is a strategy for narrowing down the problem through a process that might be called exorcism. If you are obsessed with a particular aspect of the problem but know that you do not have the time or other resources to deal with it, you have to acknowledge its importance to you, write up something that defines it as a future project, and file it away. You may be able to convince yourself to separate that aspect of the problem from these aspects you can handle and finish.

Deciding on questions is a rolling (or “iterative” or “recursive”) process of raising a series of them, discarding some, reformulating others, and then thinking (assuming your entry point is empirical) about their theoretical implications. Similarly, if your entry point is theoretical, you need to think about their empirical implications. The process of defining the research questions does not end with the formulation of a hypothesis, as the traditional image of scientific method has it. Instead, to repeat, the process must be a rolling one—you learn more, the question shifts, become redefined, sometimes more focused, sometimes more general. Research questions are always successive approximations, as you learn more about the phenomenon being analyzed. And, there is always a gap (or “slippery”) between the theoretical and empirical tracks—the evidence never quite fits the theoretical claims; the concepts never quite grasp the complexity of the empirical phenomenon.

Defining a problem requires mapping the intellectual territory, tracking footnotes through the jungle of relevant books and articles, asking friends and colleagues about key works to read. You start formulating possible research questions and think about both the theoretical and the empirical implications.
of asking different kinds of questions. Before committing yourself to a research question, there is no substitute for broad and even playful "reading around" in a subject. You may criticize the arguments in the literature, both theoretically and empirically, as part of the process of defining the relevant theoretical and empirical issues and establishing your own point of view.

Here are some examples of bad research questions: "Is Max Weber's concept of 'verstehen' more useful than Durkheim's concept of 'social fact'?" or "Is field research better than statistical analysis?" or "Should feminists criticize sociology for a masculine bias?" None of those questions poses an analytic problem, that is, a potential relationship between theoretical and empirical questions. Better questions would be: "Does Marx's concept of the 'dialectic' assume a social psychological process that Weber called 'verstehen'?" or "What kinds of research questions are more easily answered by field research than by statistical analysis?" or "Do standard research techniques of sampling and questionnaire design make unexamined assumptions about gender differences?"

Consider two questions of historical fact: "How many suicides were there in France on sunny as compared to rainy days in 1850?" and "Did Louis Bonaparte come to the palace on December 2, 1851?" These questions may well be significant if located in the context of a theoretical issue, as I demonstrate later in my discussion of works by Durkheim and Marx. But as posed, without such a theoretical context, the questions have no research significance. Durkheim wanted to refute elitist theories of suicide, so the correlation of the number of suicides with the weather was significant. Marx was concerned with the political role of Bonaparte in the dissolution of parliament, and his movement on a particular day might well have been important. But without such a context, the "facts" have no significance.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL TRACKS OF ANALYSIS

The most fruitful way to think about the research process is to constantly move back and forth from reflective musings about the larger implications of concepts and theories to quite concrete, grounded analyses of observations, evidence, or data. I call this process of moving back and forth from the theoretical to the empirical tracks of analysis, in the course of following different leads in the research literature and in the evidence.

Sometimes it is important to come down to earth by immersing yourself in the evidence. You may observe a group for months, take extensive notes from a historical archive, or collect extensive questionnaire data on a population. Buried in data, you feel for a while that you are making progress. However, at some point, without the guidance of theoretical questions, you may lose sight of your purpose. You may ask yourself: Why am I doing all these interviews, recording all these field notes, computing all these statistics? You have fled to empiricism. Empirical explorations should always be related to theoretical interpretation, but, given the inevitable gap between theory and evidence, it is difficult, albeit important, to learn how to move back and forth between the two tracks of analysis. A skilled research process does not follow automatically from orthodox scientific procedures—specify a hypothesis, generate data, test the hypothesis.

Sometimes it is important to float in the "clouds" of conceptual abstractions. You may, for example, compare and contrast Marx and Foucault, Weber and Giddens, or Durkheim and Parsons, with respect to the significance of power, rationality, or class for your problem. Then you may ask how these concepts are constructed in the "life-world" and read Habermas. Searching for fundamental theoretical arguments that frame your inquiry, you may lose sight of the original problem that motivated the project. You have fled to theoreticism. The way out of either empiricism or theoreticism is to see the two tracks of analysis as dialectically interrelated throughout the process of inquiry.

Moving back and forth from the clouds of theory to the ground of evidence is thus central to the craft of inquiry. Three points can be made. First, your entry point opens up a range of theoretical issues to the "spotlight" that focuses alternatively on the evidence and on the theoretical implications of the evidence. Although your theoretical and empirical interests may be well defined, in my experience that is seldom the case in the beginnings of inquiry.

Second, trying to merge theory and evidence results in confusion and paralysis. Theoretical concepts and assumptions should not be reduced to empirical procedures and evidence. Rich data and rigorous evidence cannot replace a coherent theoretical argument. Nor should the empirical implications of theory be avoided. Brilliant, logically consistent theoretical claims cannot substitute for evidence.

Third, explanation and description are different. A theoretical question is a search for an explanation of something and answers the question "Why." An empirical question asks for a description of an association or pattern of the events, behaviors, activities, beliefs, perceptions, and interests that constitute social life. An empirical association becomes evidence that is relevant to answering the theoretical question.

Even quite similar questions will lead you down quite different theoretical and empirical paths. Frequently during the course of a research project you will find that you have generated or discovered evidence that answers a quite different question from the one that began the inquiry. Sometimes you may realize that a quite different theoretical question is the crucial one and requires quite different kinds of evidence. These are both the hazards and the challenges of the process of social inquiry.

The theoretical and the empirical aspects of a problem are thus always in tension with each other. Abstract concepts never perfectly fit the complexity of reality. Evidence never contains its own explanation. Actual research practices contradict the classical positivist theory of knowledge that deductive theory predicts empirical support for an hypothesis and that inductively derived empirical generalizations confirm or falsify theories. In the course of a given project, the research question will be reformulated many times as either new evidence
modifies the theoretical formulations or the revised theory calls for new empirical observations.\textsuperscript{6} Theoretical and empirical questions are thus not logically distinct "inductive" or "deductive" types of inquiry. The skills embedded in the craft of social inquiry entail moving back and forth between theoretical and empirical tracks of analysis, neither merging them nor isolating them from each other.

Technical issues of measurement are (or should be) intrinsically connected to the underlying theory you are using or developing. As you define empirical measures, you are simultaneously specifying the content of the theoretical concepts. Every concept in each question you pose has both theoretical and empirical aspects. That is, the questions point "up" toward abstract bodies of related concepts and "down" toward relevant evidence of various kinds (itself located and defined by means of concepts). For example, the categories "man" and "woman" both contain theoretical assumptions about "sex" and "gender" and point toward observable behaviors or attributes that constitute the empirical referents of the categories.

Evidence ("empirical indicators") is always given significance by theory. Water, ice, and snow become the "same thing" (i.e., different forms of H\textsubscript{2}O) by a theory of chemical structure and by empirical predictions of transformations of form under specified conditions. Goffman's theory of "total institutions" (see Chapter 5) constructs similarities among elite boarding schools, mental hospitals, prisons, armies, seminaries, and totalitarian political parties that were not apparent until the theory abstracted from the empirical differences. "Total institutions" as a theoretical concept allows generalizations across widely different empirically observed entities (in this case, those organizations that attempt to observe and control every aspect of behavior and also to construct new identities for their students, inmates, clients, members, adherents, or patients).

The point is that concepts classify similarities and differences as part of the building blocks of theoretical claims. The "research question" is a strategic formulation that allows you simultaneously to draw on concepts and assumptions from the clouds of theory to help organize an argument that is also grounded in evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, a good research problem must be broken down into its two aspects in order to define both theoretical and empirical research questions. The theoretical question orients you toward the theoretical concepts within the relevant literature and frames the empirical question with a theoretical justification. Why did something happen? What explains what exists? What are the causes of an empirical association between observations or correlations among variables? Why did these events occur or these behaviors develop?\textsuperscript{11} The empirical question directs you toward certain kinds of evidence that is necessary to answer the theoretical question. What happened? What is going on? What exists? What is the association between two events? What are the patterns of behavior?\textsuperscript{12}

Formulating "research questions" helps you focus on one particular aspect of the set of issues that is of interest. In a substantial research project, there will be more than one; in a thesis or dissertation, there will be many, at least one per chapter, perhaps more. A general research question contains a number of more specific ones, each of which points toward a different aspect of the phenomenon you are interested in describing and explaining.

Once a research problem has been identified and a theoretical or empirical entry point chosen, you will face a set of choices about the kind of argument you will make in your project. Chapter 3 presents a basic map of three distinct but related paradigms of inquiry in sociology.
Interpretive arguments focus on the symbolic meanings of human behavior, expressed in cultural assumptions, ideologies of conformity or resistance, as well as historical and institutional contexts. These arguments refer to the discursive dimension of the paradigm, beyond the differing theories and methodological perspectives. In this chapter, the ways in which social institutions create meaning and inform personal identities, and define social roles that are meaningful to life, are already engaged in Chapters 3, through the wide variety of types of evidence. The symbolic meanings of behavior within institutions can be studied through a wide variety of types of evidence. In this chapter, I present analyses of three very different works with foreground interpretive arguments: Weber's sociological classic, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904), Erving Goffman's equally classic ethnographic study of mental hospitals, Asylums (1961), and a more recent multiple argument work by Arlie Hochschild, The Second Shift (1990), which analyzes the ways in which men and women negotiate the different roles they fulfill in their homes.

WHAT SYMBOLIC MEANINGS CONSTRUCT THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM?

Max Weber was not a sociologist by training or professional affiliation, but a historian and economist. He was one of the many scholars who studied the economic history that he had written. In 1904, he published the first part of his book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. As a series of essays, it remained a bestseller, and it has been translated into many languages. Weber was interested in the ways in which the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism influenced the development of modern economic institutions. He argued that the Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on hard work and thrift, created an倾向towards entrepreneurship and innovation, which were essential for the development of capitalism. Weber was also interested in the ways in which individuals and groups negotiated the competing demands of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. He argued that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism created different types of social roles and identities, which shaped the way individuals and groups interacted with each other.

Symbolic Meaning

The Protestant Ethic is on the social construction of meaning. Weber's theoretical question might be phrased as: How did the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism affect the development of modern economic institutions? Weber argued that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism created different types of social roles and identities, which shaped the way individuals and groups interacted with each other. He also argued that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism created different types of social roles and identities, which shaped the way individuals and groups interacted with each other.

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Weber's argument rests on *cognitive* and *symbolic* interpretations: beliefs that interpret the world, create motives, and generate activities that arise from the beliefs. No evidence refers to factories, banks, churches, or any other institution where work, saving, or religious activity takes place. Nothing is said about mechanisms of social control that enforce the ethic. True to the title, the work is about an "ethic" and a "spirit," both symbolically constructed.

Weber has constructed a psychologically plausible set of meanings that might have been attached to Lutheran dogma about salvation and the ways people may become convinced that they have reached a state of grace. He sticks closely to the interpretation of texts, although they are used not to document sequences of historical events but rather to infer powerfully binding emotional and cognitive commitments to both religious and economic behaviors.

**Historical Processes**

The *Protestant Ethic* is, on the surface, a historical work. Weber prefaces the thesis by comparing the Occident to all other societies, noting its historical uniqueness—the aspects of Western society that set it apart from all others. And the argument that Weber eventually develops, as seen in his last chapter, is indeed a historical one. There he writes almost poetically about the way in which asceticism, once it had played its historical role in creating the conditions for capitalist development, was itself undermined in dialectical fashion.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. (p. 181)

However, I argue that a historical paradigm remains in the background for Weber, at least in this work, because he frames his historical considerations in a consistently interpretive manner. No specific events or their time and place are mentioned, although the basic terms of reference are historical totalities: the "West," "Protestantism," "capitalism," "the rationality of modern society." These historical assertions about the changing role of religion in modern societies are neither empirically nor theoretically elaborated.

**Multivariate Relations**

Multivariate inferences are woven through Weber's argument. The very beginning of the book makes multivariate statements about the relationship of occupation to religion, supported by a quantitative table in a footnote that contains a statistical table from Baden in 1895 that shows the religious affiliation of the students in schools differing in their emphasis on a technical as compared to a classical curriculum. Catholics were underrepresented in the more "technical" schools. It is significant that the quantitative table showing the relationship between religion and type of school is not in the body of the text. Weber, in effect, is saying that these statistics are merely suggestive; one shouldn't place too much weight on them. The assumption of a causal relationship between religious affiliation and class motivation and achievement is his empirical entry point.

Weber asserts that among both Germans and Poles, Protestants are more likely than Catholics to be business leaders and owners of capital, upper-level skilled workers, technical and commercially trained personnel in large enterprises, and managers. Weber does not go into detail about these skimpy empirical findings. He does not consider, for example, whether the apparent "religious effect" was really an "ethnic effect" possibly resulting from a similarity in the ethnic makeup of both the occupational and the religious groups.

Such prosaic methodological questions are central to the multivariate paradigm. By treating such empirical generalizations so casually, Weber is signaling to us that such multivariate assumptions are not his core concern. He does not investigate the empirical relations between religious beliefs and economic behavior.

Weber says that the explanation for the relationship between occupation and religion is that "the mental and spiritual peculiarities acquired from the environment, here the type of education favored by the religious atmosphere of the home community and the parental home, have determined [italics added] the choice of occupation, and through it the professional career" (p. 39). Here he situates us on the mechanisms that intervene between the Protestant ethic and the capitalist spirit. The complex data he might have collected illustrate a possible multivariate empirical generalization.

Weber could have drawn samples first of "communities" and then of "parental homes" and developed measures of the "religious atmosphere" of both the community and the home. He might have resorted to field work, visiting a number of communities in order to establish their "religious atmosphere." He could have visited Protestant and Catholic families on Sunday and observed whether they said grace, prayed at night, went to church. Would these behaviors constitute a "religious atmosphere"? Would a close connection between "religious atmosphere in the home" and "occupational motivation" be shown by the talk of mothers to sons about their aspirations for them? How would we know if the mother had a conception of a "calling" when she advised her son to become a capitalist? What evidence, in other words, would be necessary to establish a causal relationship between religion and occupational choice? Weber was silent about these multivariate inferences. His foreground theoretical claim concerned the interpretation of meanings, not the prediction of behavior.

In his very last pages, Weber suggests that the "next task" in a research project would be the construction of empirical generalizations that might lead to an "estimate" of the "quantitative cultural significance" of ascetic Protestantism. The problems for the "next task" are fully historical as well. He proposes a study of both the causes of ascetic rationalism in "the totality of social conditions, especially economic," and the consequences for "social ethics," the "organization and the functions of social groups," "technical development,"
and "philosophical and scientific empiricism," among others (pp. 182–183). They remain background arguments, in part because Weber has not yet established a firm empirical connection between the key events.

From the symbolic meanings of the "calling" and "ascetic rationalism," Weber makes numerous causal inferences that are not supported by evidence but are asserted as "obvious": for example, "+ the exclusive search for the Kingdom of God only through the fulfillment of duty in the calling, and the strict asceticism which Church discipline naturally imposed, especially on the propertyless classes, was bound to affect the productivity of labor . . . " (p. 178). Why was it "bound" to have that effect? This multivariate argument is a shadow background inference from the foreground argument about "utilitarian interpretations" and "psychological sanctions" as a cluster of conceptions about the conditions under which life has meaning. And, as already noted, although this assertion is grounded in an assumption about specific events that take place in particular moments, there are no references to any laborers producing anything anytime or anywhere with any sense of duty or calling.

The sociologist Gianfranco Poggi says that no studies of the empirical correlation between Calvinism and entrepreneurship, for example, have been done. He argues that "Weber, with most of his contemporaries, simply assumed [italics added] a basic factual correlation between adherence to Reformed Christianity, on the one hand, and the formation of early entrepreneurship, on the other" (p. 298). Instead, he sought "exclusively to identify the precise link 'at the level of meaning' between the two by asking what aspects of what strands of Reformed Christianity fostered what changes in individual . . . conduct. This distinctive concern of Weber was further dictated by his meaning-centered conception [italics added] of the makings of action. In the context of historical research [added] on an event of the dimensions of the rise of capitalism, that conception inspired him to emphasize authoritatively proffered definitions of meanings and collective codes of conduct" (p. 298).5

To summarize, Weber presupposes a complex historical narrative about both the rise of capitalism in the West and the rise of Protestantism, and about their interrelationships as they develop. Barely any events at all are mentioned in The Protestant Ethic, which focuses on the presumed behavioral consequences of two kinds of symbolic meanings: a "spirit" of economic accumulation as a sign of the "ethic" of religious salvation. Though arguments about multivariate relations run throughout the book, the power of Weber's argument derives from his unique interpretive focus on cultural meanings in an institutional and historical context.

HOW ARE INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES UNDERMINED IN TOTAL INSTITUTIONS?

Erving Goffman's classic work Asylums, a study of the threats to individual identity in mental hospitals, was published in 1961.6 Goffman's ethnographic study asks, What are the organizational processes in "total institutions" that allow the destruction of "normal" personal and social identities? It is a tour de force of analysis, combining a focus on organizational structures and on the concrete interactions between the individuals who play different roles within and between them: "patients," "staff members," "doctors," "family members." Goffman's foreground argument is within one branch of the interpretive paradigm: The evidence is drawn from participant observation, and he is developing a theory of the self as symbolically constructed (and undermined) through interaction.

Asylums was Goffman's second book, following his dissertation, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, a field study of life among Shetland Islanders.7 Asylums is based on a year's field work at St. Elizabeth's, a mental hospital in Washington, D.C. Goffman said that his object was to "try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him" (p. ix, italics added). His basic theoretical assumption is that "any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to them. . . ." (pp. ix–x, italics added). He describes his method as follows: "[A] good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject"—that is, participant observation. Goffman warns us that adopting the perspective of the patient is likely to provide a "partisan view," since the worldview of a group (here the patients) "provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation [italics added] and a prejudiced view of nonmembers . . ." (p. x).

Goffman starts the book with a thoroughly structural analysis of what he calls "social establishments," of which "total institutions" are a subset. He describes them in terms of variables: degree of openness, continuity of membership, source of status. Total institutions—those that encompass and control most of the lives of their inhabitants—are widely varied in content: prisons, mental hospitals, homes for the blind and aged or infirm, orphanages, P.O.W. camps, concentration camps, army barracks, ships, monasteries, convents, colonial compounds, work camps. The category "total institution" is an ideal type—none of the examples have all of the attributes of the type (p. 5). In total institutions, people work, sleep, and live in the same place, unlike the normal institutions and lives of "civil society" (the contrasting category). The "handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people" is the "key fact" of total institutions" (p. 6).

Goffman's action question is implicit: "How can the integrity of the self be preserved in large scale bureaucratic organizations?" His most general theoretical questions might be phrased as follows: "How are personal identities ('the self') constructed and undermined in different kinds of organizations?" More specifically: "What are the processes in total institutions that first destroy the self created in civil society and then reconstruct the kind of self (and social world) possible under those conditions?" These questions
do not focus on the relative importance of different factors, unlike multivariate arguments.

**Symbolic Meanings**

Goffman is committed to an argument within an interpretive paradigm. He holds that social identities that have meaning for individuals are constructed in the course of interaction and that institutions are constructed from combinations of social roles ("social selves"). The power of Goffman's analysis of the impact of institutions on individuals, especially mental hospitals, rests partly on his not assuming any mental or emotional states, or even "crazy" behavior, on the part of the "patient." Goffman calls into question the assumption that the status of "patient" is necessarily associated with any subjective states of being or objectively describable behaviors. He assumes that much the same things would happen to anybody placed in such an institution: a sense of abandonment and of being deprived of the markers of personal integrity that "normal people" count on. Part of the dramatic power of his argument comes from this hypothesis.

In analyzing what happens to new patients, he argues that they learn the "limited extent to which a conception of oneself can be sustained when the usual setting of supports for it are suddenly removed" (p. 148, italics added). Here is another example of the interaction between the "I" and the "me" made famous by G. H. Mead: the socially supported conception of oneself versus the one that is no longer sustained by the social environment.

Goffman shows his foreground interpretive arguments very clearly in his analysis of the way the formal, rational goals of the institution are translated into a "language of explanation" that interprets "every crevice of action in the institution" (p. 83). A "medical frame of reference" is a "perspective ready to account for all manner of decisions" in a mental hospital, including even the hours when meals are served. "Each official goal lets loose a doctrine, with its own inquisitors and its own martyrs, and within institutions there seems to be no natural check on the licence of easy interpretation which result; . . . words and verbalized perspectives . . . come to play a central and often feverish role" (p. 84, all italics added).

Goffman refers to the "interpretive scheme" of the total institution. The assumption here is that the institution has a symbolic frame of reference, a language of interpretation, that assigns categories ("sick," "rebellious," "sinful") to behavior, no matter what that behavior is. The behavior is thus rationalized and normalized according to the meanings assigned by the ideology of the institution. "Legitimated objectives" are translated into "ideological phrasings" and into the "simple language" of the privilege system, for example (p. 85). These are the levels of symbolic meanings that justify the institution and "define the situation" for both staff and inmates.

The symbolic interpretation of behavior, and the consequences of applied labels, constitute a central theoretical claim for Goffman. He is dealing with a complex series of interactions among social roles with sets of expectations and identities, all defined symbolically. He argues at the end that one of the main functions of the mental hospital is not "treatment" at all but rather the reinforcement of the belief of the professional staff that treatment is indeed taking place and that they are responsible for it.

When an individual has a "primary adjustment" to an organization, "he finds that he is officially asked to be no more and no less than he is prepared to be" (p. 189, italics added). This is another example of the multiple conceptions of the self described in Goffman's work. The external demands of the self coincide with the internal expectations of the self, but there is also another self looking on, the one observing the relationship between being asked and being prepared. The institution's demands coincides with the individual's view of himself.

The contradictions inherent in the social role of psychiatrist are an excellent example of the integration of theory and evidence in Goffman's argument. There is a contradiction built into the service relationship between psychiatrist and inmate in a mental hospital (pp. 366–368). The psychiatric staff "are in a position neither to forego the fiction of neutrality nor actually to sustain it" (p. 366). The inmate must accept the appropriateness of being treated as a "patient" if "the psychiatrist is to be affirmed as a medical server." But accepting the patient role is not likely, because the inmate is usually not in the hospital voluntarily. Instead, the patient is likely to complain and treat the situation as if he were a prisoner with a jailor or a "prideful man declining to exchange communications with someone who thinks he is crazy" (p. 367).

The psychiatrist is in a double bind. To defend his professional role, he must treat the "outpourings" of the patient's anger not as information from a human being about her situation but as signs of the illness. But (and here is the contradiction), if the psychiatrist treats the "statements of the patient as signs, not valid symptom reporting, it is of course to deny that the patient is a participant as well as an object in a service relation" (p. 368). Similarly, when a patient expresses hatred for the hospital, that is evidence to the psychiatrist that "his place in it is justified and that he is not yet ready to leave it." In this way, "a systematic confusion between obedience to others and one's own personal adjustment is sponsored" (p. 385).

This is a very significant point. Because acceptance of institutional regimentation and social conformity are regarded as "healthy behavior," the ideological identification of institutional stability with mental health prevents an accurate assessment by the psychiatrist of what is really going on in the institution—and in the inmate. The enormous insecurities and traumas created by institutional life itself create and sustain "hostility" and "aggressive behavior," which are then systematically either denied or "translated" into the individual inmate, whose illness is made the "cause" of the behavior.

Goffman is here pointing to a critical internal contradiction in a professional service relationship with a client or patient who is being "treated" involuntarily. This is one of Goffman's most powerful and disturbing points, and one that would be difficult to translate into multivariate language.
Multivariate Relations

Goffman rejected the "usual kinds of measurements and controls," arguing that "the role and time required to gather statistical evidence for a few statements would preclude my gathering data on the tissue and fabric of patient life" (p. x). This assertion underlines the challenge of any research project—how to define the research questions as sharply as possible so that the results from any given empirical foray will be worth the investment of limited time and resources.

Asylum is full of generalizations among empirically measurable variables, but they are not explicitly defined as such, nor is evidence mobilized to test the hypotheses contained in them, as a few examples will show. A comparative study could be done of the different kinds of institutions Goffman theorizes about: prisons, army barracks, mental hospitals, boarding schools, concentration camps. Such a study could test his hypotheses about stratification, language, the privilege system, and the mortification of the self to see if the empirical evidence supports his hypotheses about the correlation between institutional arrangements and consequences for the self.

While the concept of "total institution" is an ideal type, one could also test for the empirical frequency of the correlation among such structural variables as spatial segregation, bureaucratic organization, labeling, use of admissions procedures that erase individual differences, rules for treating all people the same, loss of external status, degradation ceremonies, control of daily behavior via surveillance, and sharp stratification between staff and inmates.

Another possible multivariate hypothesis is: "Given the expressive idioms of a particular civil society, certain movements, postures, and stances will convey lowly images of the individual and be avoided as demeaning." (p. 21). To evaluate this hypothesis, one could videotape persons of different status and different institutional locations (patient or inmate vs. staff member or physician) and correlate their status with their posture and movements. Are such variables measurable? Is the status "conveyed" by the posture, "correlated" with the posture? These possible questions suggest the difference between multivariate and interpretive questions.

Evidence and Theory

Goffman confidently reports all of the patterns he describes as if they validly distinguish significant variations in social roles and behavior in the mental hospital he studied. Dramatic examples from the sociological literature and from novels and personal accounts, plus illustrative incidents and field notes from his year of observation of one mental hospital, support his generalizations.

Goffman says that when the private pursuits of inmates (singing, art, woodworking, card playing) get too engrossing, the staff will object, because "in their eyes the institution ... must possess the inmate," not any other activity or membership (p. 69). But how does he know what the staff believes about the institutional goals? Maybe the staff is just as cynical about the "institution" as the inmates. It is interesting that he assumes that the staff's perceptions and beliefs are aligned with those of the "institution." No evidence for that supposition is cited, nor does he make any theoretical claim about how the staff gets imbued with the official ideology or their incentives for supporting it.

Goffman says that he does not want to rely upon "data" about what the person "say he think he imagine himself to be" (p. 127, italics added). Note the multiple levels of what the person is signifying to himself, again in the spirit of G. H. Mead. What the person is one thing; then he imagine himself as something; then he think about imagining himself as something, then he say that he thinks he imagine himself to be something. What Goffman omits here are the further levels of interpretation: the person being "said to," and the second person's interpretation of what the first person says (with the further and analogous complexities of the second person's thinking, imagining, being), and then the communication of these different interpretations back and forth.

Goffman also ignores his own participation in this nest of interpretations; he is the interpreter of all of these interpretations, constructing generalizations about the character of the selves and their moral careers. Goffman himself is absent in the smooth flow of his argument. He reports all of these interpretations as if they are social facts. The sheer literary quality of his writing pulls us along, gives his theoretical claims a sheen of coherence and credibility, regardless of their intrinsic theoretical or empirical merits.

Historical Processes

Goffman mentions almost no concrete historical events, and the only places he mentions are countries. Ironically, he probably got the fellowship at the National Institutes of Mental Health (and the support for the year of field work at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1956) because of the series of prison and mental hospital riots and disruptions that took place in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which led to the attempt to dismantle or reform those institutions. None of these events is mentioned in Goffman, nor is there any attention given to the conditions under which collective resistance is likely (he argues that it is highly unlikely). Goffman does not pose the question "Under what conditions will inmates engage in collective resistance that disrupts the normal functioning of the institution and leads to change?" One knows nothing of such possible events from the book.

Although full of concrete references to specific situations (and in that sense not "theoretical" at all), the book is divorced from place and time. Goffman does give a few historical details. He mentions the "Western history of the interpretation of persons who seem to act oddly" (p. 350, italics added). He does refer to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, when the "medical mandate" began, inmates began to be labeled "patients" and madhouses were retilled "mental hospitals." He notes that, in 1756, in the United States, a "similar movement" began at the Pennsylvania Hospital. And, referring to "today in the West," he discusses the differences between practitioners with "organic" approaches and those with "functional" approaches. On page 354 he mentions
the "recent historical context" of the development of mental hospitals from a variety of other institutions. 8

In describing activities in "Central Hospital" during his field work, Goffman makes many references to specific incidents, but they are not labeled by date. The place is identified, but not any specific individual by name, only by role (patient, guard, staff, doctor). There are many examples of "abstract" sequences of events, a narrative or story about some situation in which events occur over time. But none of these are concrete, dated events involving named persons in a specific place, in sharp contrast to foreground historical arguments.

Conclusion

All of Goffman's descriptions of the social processes that constitute the daily life of an asylum (of whatever kind) are based on implicit empirical generalizations about specific events and activities in specific times and places, but none are given in this work, because of the way his theoretical categories structure his presentation of the evidence.

What is striking about Goffman's general argument is the ways in which the concept of total institution finds similarities in organizations so seemingly completely different in their social functions and human values. Goffman's work demonstrates the power of a sociological imagination, its ability to find analogies and common patterns among such different types of social institutions as boarding schools, concentration camps, mental hospitals, and prisons.

HOW DO MEN AND WOMEN NEGOTIATE HOUSEWORK?

Arlie Hochschild's The Second Shift is a foreground interpretive argument about the emotional dynamics of relations between men and women over the knotty issues of housework and child care. 9 Hochschild interviewed 145 persons, spoke with fifty couples in greater depth, and observed the home life of twelve couples. Half of the seventeen chapters are devoted to an ethnographic account of the home life of eight couples and their children. The demographic transformation of the household frames the study: In the late 1980s, two thirds of all mothers were in the labor force, including fully half of all mothers with children under the age of one year (p. 2). Both husband and wife in each family in the study worked. As the title of the book implies, in most of the couples, the wife worked a "second shift." The heart of Hochschild's study is the complex emotional negotiations that go on between the husband and the wife over the household division of labor.

Symbolic Meanings

Hochschild herself frames the "deeply emotional issues" of her book in question format: "What should a man and woman contribute to the family? How appreciated does each feel? How does each develop an unconscious 'gender strategy' for coping with the work at home, with marriage, and indeed, with life itself?" (p. 3). Her empirical answers to these questions were followed by a chapter dealing with the question "How do men who share differ from other men?" (p. 216, italics in original). Nothing about men's own upbringings provided a clue, and "each story differed totally from the next" (p. 216). The number of hours the men worked or how much money they earned did not distinguish those who shared housework from those who didn't. Hochschild falls back on separate stories for each man who did and who did not share the household tasks.

The "gender strategies" Hochschild describes in her most general theoretical claims involve a complex set of interactions between the man and the woman and a cycle of reinforcements for women who work the "second shift." Her basic argument is worth summarizing:

... because men put more of their 'male' identity in work, their work time is worth more than female work time—to the man and to the family. The greater worth of male work time makes his leisure more valuable, because it is leisure that enables him to refuel his energy, strengthen his ambition and move ahead at work. ... The female side of the cycle runs parallel. The woman's identity is less in her job. Since her work comes second, she carries more of the second shift, thus providing backstage support for her husband's work. Because she supports his husband's efforts at work more than he supports hers, her personal ambitions contract and her earnings already lower, rise more slowly. The extra month a year that she works contributes not only to her husband's success but to the expanding wage gap between them, and keeps the cycle spinning. (p. 254)

This summary of Hochschild's basic argument vividly conveys the combination of material circumstances and emotional dynamics that explains the core empirical finding—that even employed women must also work the "second shift."

Historical Processes

Hochschild's background historical argument focuses on the changing meaning of "patriarchy." As she puts it,

[Formerly, many men dominated women within marriage. Now, despite a much wider acceptance of women as workers, men dominate women anonymously outside of marriage. Patriarchy has not disappeared; it has changed form. In the old form, women were forced to obey an overbearing husband in the privacy of an unjust marriage. In the new form, the working single mother is economically abandoned by her former husband and ignored by a patriarchal society at large.... The 'modern' oppression of women outside of marriage has also reduced the power of women inside marriage as well (p. 251 italics in original).

Hochschild here is going far beyond the evidence that she has in order to place the experiences of the husbands and wives negotiating the terms of house-
work and child care in the much wider historical context of the transformation of the economy and thus of households. Her dialectical argument emphasizes the pressures operating both to undermine patriarchy and to sustain it. In her words,

...two forces are at work: new economic opportunities and needs, which draw women to paid work and which put pressure on men to share the second shift. These forces lend appeal to an egalitarian gender ideology and to strategies of renegotiating the division of labor at home. But other forces—the wage gap between men and women, and the effect on women of the rising rate of divorce—work in the opposite direction. These forces lend appeal to a traditional gender ideology and to the female strategy of the supermom and to the male strategy of resistance to sharing. (p. 253)

This background historical perspective gives Hochschild's foreground interpretive argument a powerful analytic frame.

Multivariate Relations

Multivariate research by others on "who does the housework and childcare" also frames Hochschild's interpretive argument, mainly in Chapter 1 and in an Appendix that summarizes the research literature. A number of surveys have asked people to remember what they did the previous day. All of them found a "leisure gap" between men and women: differences in how much free time they had after both work and family responsibilities were done. The gap ranged from one hour in one study to as much as thirty hours in a 1981 study of professional women with children (p. 278). Hochschild's dramatic formulation of this states that on the average women work "an extra month of twenty-four-hour days per year" (p. 3, italics in original).

Hochschild cites a number of multivariate empirical generalizations that have significance only within her interpretive theoretical claims—for example, "the higher up the corporate ladder, the more home support a worker had," whether man or woman (p. 255); "a mother's employment has no consistent ill effects upon a child's school achievement, IQ, or social and emotional development" (p. 236); "... compared to the sons of housewives, middle-class boys raised by working mothers were less confident and did less well in school" (p. 236); "twenty percent of the men in my study shared housework equally. Seventy percent of men did a substantial amount (less than half but more than a third), and 10 percent did less than a third" (p. 8); men were more likely to speak about household chores in terms of "liked and disliked," whereas women spoke in terms of what needed to be done (p. 282); or "the less the wife earned (relative to her husband) the more housework she did" (p. 284).

These disparate empirical findings need a theoretical context to give them significance. They underline the importance of multivariate relationships in Hochschild's study. Her study would have been much less rich if she had not summarized the research literature and framed her own findings in multivariate language.

CONCLUSIONS

Foreground interpretive arguments focus on the theoretical importance of the symbolic construction of meanings in social interaction. Such meanings are inferred from observations of behavior in natural situations, from interpretations of texts, and from depth interviews that interrogate individuals about the way in which they interpret their experiences and social relations. The observer is seen as a participant in the co-construction of meanings, not as a separate, isolated, neutral, and "objective" scientific analyst.

Weber's key terms "capitalistic spirit" and "Protestant ethic" evoke the image of human beings attempting in a chaotic and uncertain world to find the certainty of eternal salvation by the hard labor of economic accumulation. Goffman's panorama of the relations among nurses, doctors, and inmates in and of mental hospitals shows the ambiguities of social roles in a precarious environment. Hochschild portrays the private dramas of family life as men and women negotiate their gender identities in the course of mundane struggles over washing the kitchen floor.

The strengths of interpretive arguments are found in their sensitivity to the complicated negotiations of meanings among human actors at the "micro" level and the ways in which deeply embedded cultural and linguistic symbols define personal identities, shape the legitimate boundaries of action, and channel potential resistance at the "macro" level. Their weaknesses, from the standpoint of the goal of constructing well-confirmed empirical generalizations linked to coherent theoretical claims, is their tendency to rely on the subjective insights of observers and interpreters. From "inside" that paradigm, such reliance is, of course, not a weakness but inevitable.