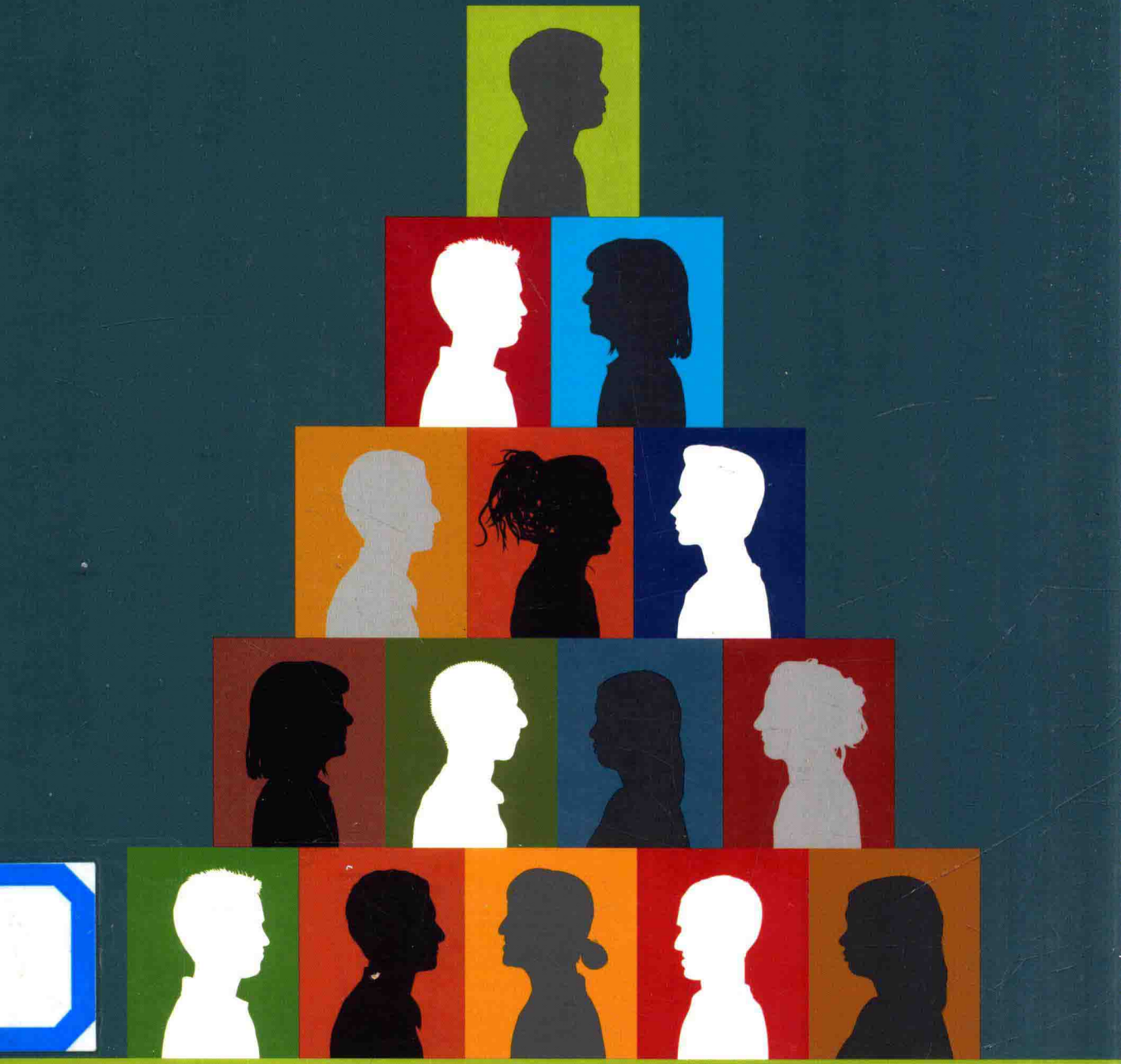
READING SOCIAL RESEARCH

STUDIES IN INEQUALITIES AND DEVIANCE



JEFFREY C. DIXON | ROYCE A. SINGLETON, JR.

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STUDIES IN INEQUALITIES AND DEVIANCE

JEFFREY C. DIXON | BRUCE A. SINGLETON, JR.
College of the Holy Cross

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PREFACE

What should students learn in an introductory research methods course? In addition to learning about fundamental methodological concepts and approaches, students should be able to identify and evaluate these concepts and approaches in reports of actual research. Indeed, when we analyzed syllabi from nearly 100 courses in methods of social research, this was the most common learning objective, listed by 60 percent of the instructors. As one instructor put it, at the end of the course, students should be able to "read original research and accurately describe the researcher's questions, methodology, and findings, and . . . critically assess the author's methods and conclusions."

With this aim in mind, we ourselves have always assigned several research articles in our methods courses. Having done this, however, we know how difficult it is to find articles that are excellent examples of research and still accessible to undergraduates. The few existing readers tend to contain articles that, although accessible, are not consistently empirically rigorous. By contrast, we want our students to be able to read and understand recent articles that are exemplars of methodological concepts and approaches. The problem is that such articles tend to be too complex and too long.

This book, a collection of 20 articles and book excerpts, is our answer to the problem. The collection is comprehensive, covering a broad range of methodological approaches and topics found in most courses in social research methods and in many research methods textbooks (e.g., Babbie, 2013; Schutt, 2012; Singleton & Straits, 2010). The selections represent some of the latest and best work in sociology; are exemplary applications of research methods; and are highly abridged and accessible to undergraduates.

We selected readings based on several criteria. First, we chose examples of *empirical research*; therefore, we excluded literature reviews, strictly theoretical papers, commentaries, and pieces on how to conduct research. Second, selections represent research *exemplars*, which tend to be found in leading journals such as *American Sociological Review*. Third, the proposed topics, as well as many of the readings, are based on the authors' content analyses of curricula and research methods syllabi from the top 50 research universities and the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the *US News & World Report* 2011 national rankings. Fourth, reading selections focus explicitly on the key sociological dimensions of race/ethnicity, class, gender, deviance and crime, which should pique students' interest. Finally, we tried to balance quantitative and qualitative selections throughout the reader.

As we abridged each article, we made sure that readers could clearly follow the researcher's report from problem statement to literature review to methods, results, and conclusions. Wanting to make the anthology affordable, we tried to keep readings as short as possible by deleting nonessential elaborations, most footnotes, and some parts of the analysis. We also included only tables and figures that were essential to the results and that could be understood with little or no statistical knowledge. In the end, the abridgments retain the sophisticated logic and analysis that made these selections important contributions to the social science literature. They clearly demonstrate key methodological concepts and approaches while drawing students

in with interesting and provocative topics and findings.

Besides the careful abridgment of articles, the reader contains several other features designed to facilitate students' comprehension of the readings and research methodology:

- Brief introductions to each unit present key methodological concepts as well as one or more examples/illustrations of that topic and note how the unit readings are related to the topic and one another.
- Following the unit introduction, we offer web links to other material, as appropriate, such as professional codes of ethics, the American Association of Public Opinion Research's (AAOPR) discussion of random sampling, supplementary articles, and relevant data and computer programs that students can use.
- For each reading, a brief introduction places the research in the context of theory and methods and asks students to consider how the reading illustrates a concept or approach.
- At the end of each abridged article, we include questions that check students' understanding of the methodology. To further enhance the usefulness of the questions, we provide answers on a website for the book.
- We also include a glossary of the major terms used in the book.

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Acknowledgments

The content analysis of syllabi, upon which reading selections are partly based, was made possible by a Ruettgers Grant for the development of teaching resources through the College of the Holy Cross for which Meg Flanighan provided research assistance. Part of the work, too, was done during Dixon's junior research leave from the College of the Holy Cross (fall 2011). This book would not have been possible without the willingness of methods instructors to share their syllabi and ideas with us. Our colleagues at the College of the Holy Cross provided helpful thoughts and comments. Also, John Lang alerted us to possible selections and a website devoted to examples of sociological research (http://scatter.wordpress.com/2011/08/28/a-beautiful-method/#more-5498). Reviewers at Sage Publications provided valuable suggestions on our prospectus and reading selections. We thank Dave Repetto at SAGE, who was willing to take this project on and was extremely helpful and patient throughout the process. We also thank Kate Blehar of Behar Design for creating the figures in Unit I and for helping to develop the cover. Finally, we would like to thank our wives, Zeynep Mirza-Dixon and Nancy Singleton, for their suggestions, love and support. Although we have not always incorporated suggestions from all of those above, we are grateful for the time that they took to give them. This book is certainly better for it.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the best ways to learn about research methods is to read reports of empirical studies. This book consists of a collection of 20 such studies, carefully chosen to represent a broad range of approaches and methods of contemporary social research. Organized in 10 units, selected journal articles and book excerpts illustrate the relationship between theory and research, the ethical and political dimensions of research, methods of selecting cases and measuring concepts, and various ways of gathering and analyzing data. Each unit introduces the methodological topic, provides Web resources related to the topic, presents two reading selections, and then poses questions to assess your understanding of the researchers' methodology.

Although designed primarily as an introduction to research methods, this book also has a secondary goal: to expose readers to substantive topics fundamental to, and at the forefront of, sociology and other social sciences. Through rigorous empirical research, sociology and related disciplines formulate and answer questions about the social world. As we selected examples of methodological topics and approaches, we focused on studies addressing questions in the areas of race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, social class, deviance, and crime.

Race remains one of the most important determinants of life chances and personal well-being. Social scientists continue to examine issues of racial segregation and discrimination and racial differences in nearly every aspect of social life. In this book, you will find reading selections that address several questions about race:

Given that information about the race of respondents routinely appears in a variety of sociological studies (Snipp, 2003), it is important to examine how researchers determine a person's racial identity. Many studies rely on a question from the U.S. decennial Census, but Selection 5 asks: Does the standard Census question about a person's race adequately capture the lived experience of race?

Selection 10 addresses a question of employment discrimination, asking if employers are less likely to hire black than white applicants, given equivalent credentials and work experience. Selection 17 further asks: Is there a difference between what employers say they will do and what they actually do when it comes to hiring black and white ex-criminal offenders?

In addition to racial discrimination, racial segregation remains an obstacle to personal well-being and equal life chances. African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities continue to live in segregated neighborhoods, which often are located in economically depressed areas with high crime rates and other social problems. Selection 2 addresses the issue of police surveillance in a predominantly black and largely poor ghetto, asking: What is it like for young black men to be wanted by law enforcement authorities or otherwise "on the run"?

One way of measuring change in the racial climate is to trace media images of racial groups over time. Selection 15 asks: What does the portrayal of blacks in U.S. children's picture books reveal about changes in race relations in the mid- to late-twentieth century?

Research on gender has burgeoned in the last third of the 20th century. As women entered the

labor market in increasing numbers and as their level of education surpassed that of men, researchers have examined issues of employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and the household division of labor, among others. At the same time, changing gender norms influenced research on sexuality, and researchers began to examine sexual orientation as another basis of inequality. Reading selections address several of these topics:

Studies have shown that employment outside the home tends to have little impact on the amount of housework that women perform (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Research on the gender gap in household labor is beset, however, by problems in estimating the amount of housework that husbands and wives do. Selection 6 asks: How accurate are self-reports on the time spent on housework? What do survey questions reveal about the household division of labor?

The women's movement has raised consciousness about sexual harassment and sexual abuse. Selection 13 examines one form of harassment, unwelcome sexual advances, asking: What strategies do women use to thwart men who make unwanted advances in bars and nightclubs?

Selection 18 addresses a consequence of abuse, namely, what is the impact of physical and sexual abuse on patterns of marriage and cohabitation among women in low-income families?

Beginning with the gay rights movement in the 1970s and most recently with the debate on the recognition and legal sanctioning of same-sex marriage, homosexuality has been very much in the news and a focal point of social research. Two selections address questions related to homosexuality: Do attitudes toward adoption by gay and lesbian parents affect the interpretation of research on the developmental outcomes for children raised by lesbigay parents? (Selection 4) How much did Americans' attitudes toward homosexuality change in the last quarter of the 20th century? (Selection 12)

Social class forms yet another axis that defines inequality (Grusky & Ku, 2008). Research has examined many facets and consequences of class or economic inequality. Two selections mentioned above, which focus on black men in a poor ghetto (Selection 2) and women in low-income families (Selection 18), cross-cut class inequality. Other readings also address issues of inequality.

As homelessness increased nationally in the 1980s, researchers examined its prevalence and causes. Selection 20 asks: Given the stigma of being homeless, how do homeless people shape personal identities that provide them with a modicum of self-worth and dignity?

In the wake of dramatic new federal welfare legislation in the 1990s, which was designed to accelerate the transition from work to welfare, researchers examined the challenges faced by low-income single mothers. Selection 14 asks: Given that neither welfare nor low-wage work is sufficient to meet the needs of low-income single mothers, what strategies do they use to make ends meet?

According to Bruce Western and Becky Pettit (2010), "from 1980 to 2008, the U.S. incarceration rate climbed from 221 to 762 per 100,000" (p. 9). This growth in the prison population, they argue, is profoundly linked to inequality, with economic disadvantage both a cause and consequence of penal confinement. Selection 16 examines how unemployment and welfare spending, among other factors, are related to the rate of prison growth in five Western nations.

Sociologists also have a longstanding interest in deviance, or actions that violate social norms, including formal laws and informal norms of acceptable behavior. Several selections address current issues in crime and deviance, including many already noted (Selections 2, 10, 16, and 17).

Complementing Selection 16, Selection 10 also examines one of the economic penalties exacted by incarceration, asking: Given equivalent credentials and work experience, are persons with a criminal record less likely to be hired than those without a record?

Erroneous criminal convictions uncovered by DNA testing and other new techniques have led

legal scholars and social researchers to examine procedural errors in the prosecution of crimes (Lucas, Graif, & Lovaglia, 2006). Selection 9 asks: Why are prosecutors more likely to intentionally use illegal or improper methods in prosecuting a serious crime, such as murder, than a less serious crime, such as assault?

Although college drinking was once viewed as a harmless rite of passage, it became reframed in the 1990s as a public health problem partly as the result of studies of binge drinking (Dowdall, 2009). A key study was a national survey reported in Selection 11, which brought attention to the prevalence of heavy episodic drinking and its negative personal consequences. Selection 19 addresses a question raised by this early research: Is alcohol consumption related to the academic performance of college students?

Knowing the answers to the research questions posed in these readings is important for understanding the social world. But it also is important to understand how the researchers arrived at the answers—in other words, to understand the process and elements of social research. And therein lies a more practical reason for the readings: You can learn how to critically evaluate research claims and apply this knowledge in your everyday life. Moreover, these readings provide models for you to follow in conducting your own research, whether in the course you are currently taking; on a thesis, capstone, or other academic research; or on a current or future job project. Let us elaborate on both of these points.

Being able to critically evaluate research is very important because you are exposed to numerous evidentiary claims in everyday life: "The latest scientific research has found this . . ." or "evidence shows that . . ." In order to evaluate such claims, we need to better understand the research behind them. Understanding the process of measurement, for example, is central to critically evaluating claims. After reading this book, you may start to ask how "this" or "that" was actually defined and measured. And, you'll know from the reading selections on race and housework in Unit III that different measurements can yield different findings. Reading selections also discuss sampling and allude to the problem of overgeneralization, which you may encounter in everyday life. Your friend may tell you, "I'm sure that most Americans oppose this policy because all of my friends do." After reading the unit on sampling, you'll understand that claims based on a selective sample of opinions cannot be generalized to "most Americans." To make claims about a population or simply about the group of people being studied, researchers and everyday folks alike need to be systematic in how they select samples and think carefully about whether "most Americans" have an equal chance of being selected and heard.

Employers want critical-thinking and research skills, too. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* cites a recent study suggesting that there is a gap between employers' expectations and applicants' critical thinking skills (Johnson, 2011; for the original report, see: http://www.acics.org/events/content.aspx?id=4718). Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (such as the ability to evaluate scientific and other claims) are second in importance only to communication skills in a survey asking select employers what colleges should place *more* emphasis on (Hart Research Associates, 2010, p. 9). Moreover, this same report indicates that "employers see a positive benefit in educational innovations that foster active learning and research skills" (p. 7). Of the employers they surveyed, 81% said it would help a lot or a fair amount if colleges ensured "that students develop the skills to research questions in their field and develop evidence-based analyses" (p. 8). In the postindustrial, service-based economy of the United States (discussed in Selection 1), it is likely that you will need research and data analysis skills to land a job and do well in it.

As you read this book, don't forget that you are not just learning methods: You are learning something about social life; you are learning material that can applied to everyday life; and you are learning research skills that employers say that they want.

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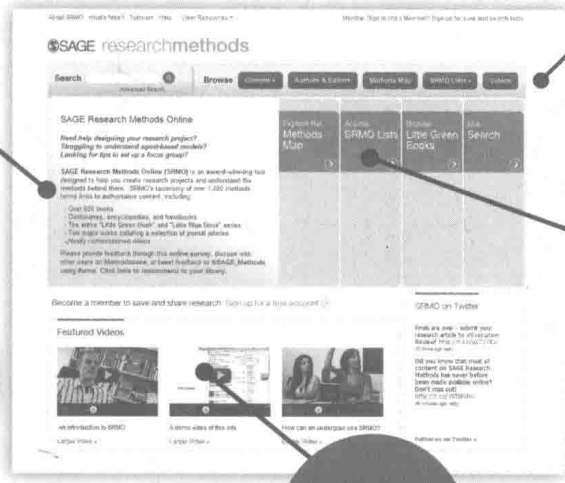

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UNIT I

FROM THEORY TO RESEARCH AND BACK

Research ideas do not just fall from the sky. Every step of the research process, from the development of hypotheses to drawing conclusions, is informed by **social theories**. A social theory, put simply, is a set of abstract statements describing how the social world works. As more and more research is conducted, and as the research environment changes, social theories may gain or lose favor, undergo modifications, or fade away altogether (Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1959). Thus, scientific research involves a constant interplay between theory and research: Social theories influence research, and research influences social theories.

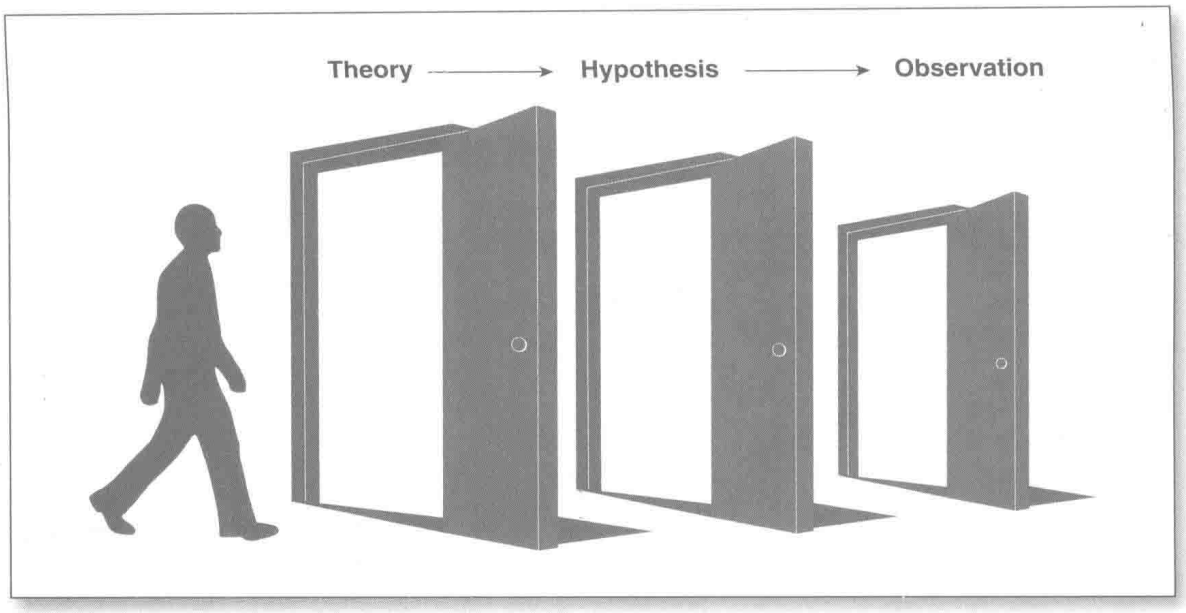
Social Theory ⟷ Research

The interplay between social theories and research occurs in one or both of two ways. One way is through **deduction,** which basically refers to moving from the abstract to the more specific. Deduction is like walking through one large door and then walking through progressively smaller doors (see Figure I.1). Sometimes, researchers deduce hypotheses, represented by the second door in Figure I.1, from theories, represented by the first door in Figure I.1. When derived from a theory, a **hypothesis** is a more *specific* statement of what the researcher expects to find. These hypotheses are then tested on observations, or data, which are represented by the third door in Figure I.1.

Consider research related to rational choice theory, which assumes that people are rational and that they make decisions on the basis of their own self-interest. The social world, according to this theory, is made up of people seeking to maximize their gains and minimize their losses. Fullerton and Dixon (2010) deduced from rational choice theory—that is, *hypothesized*—that older people would be more likely than younger people to support spending on social security. This hypothesis follows from the theory: Older people are generally closer to the age at which they can draw financial benefits from social security.

A hypothesis concerns the relationship between an **independent variable**—that is, the variable that influences the outcome—and the **dependent variable**, which is the outcome that is influenced. (Here is one way to remember this: **I**ndependent = **I**nfluences, whereas **d**ependent = influence**d**). In Fullerton and Dixon's (2010) research, the independent variable is age (older versus younger), and the dependent variable is opinion toward social security spending (e.g., support versus oppose). The hypothesis is that as age ↑, support for social security ↑. Analyzing

FIGURE I.1 Deduction



survey data—or observations—between 1984 and 2008, Fullerton and Dixon found support for their hypothesis.

In contrast to deduction, induction generally refers to moving from the specific to the more general. In this way, it is like walking through one small door and then walking through progressively larger doors (see Figure I.2). In contrast to deduction, induction may begin with observations, which are represented by the first door in Figure I.2. In the process of research, induction may mean generalizing from more specific observations to larger theoretical meanings (see the second and third doors of Figure I.2, respectively).

Although Fullerton and Dixon (2010) generally found support for their hypothesis, their data were not fully consistent with rational choice theory. For example, they found that while people generally become more supportive of social security as they age, middle-aged people were most supportive of social security. They concluded from this observation and others that even though older people may find it in their immediate self-interest to support social security, rational choice theory needs to be modified in this case because it is actually in "*everyone's* interest" to support social security (p. 664, emphasis added). And, in fact, their research is part of a continuing line of criticism of rational choice theory, which has largely fallen out of favor among sociologists today.

The two selections in this unit illustrate the connection between theory and research. The first selection highlights how researchers *deduce* hypotheses from theories—in this case, from modernization theory. Based on an ethnographic study of young black men in Philadelphia, the second selection shows how researchers *induce* broader theoretical meanings from their observations. As you read these selections, pay attention to the relationships among social theories, hypotheses, and observations.

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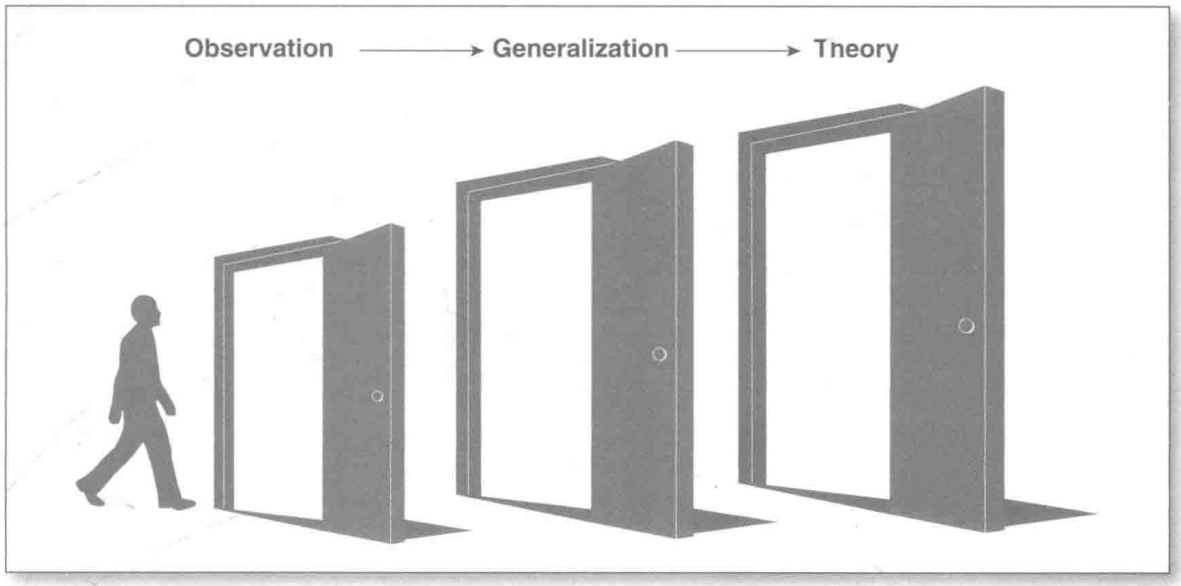
FIGURE I.2 Induction



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Resources

The American Sociological Association (ASA), Section on Theory:

http://www.asatheory.org/

- The ASA is American sociologists' national professional organization. Its website has links to theory journals and various theory-related websites; click on the Resources tab and then scroll to the middle and bottom of the page.

Marxist Internet Archive:

http://www.marxists.org/

- The researchers of the first selection draw heavily on the work of Karl Marx, a prominent sociological theorist, and you can find many of his writings at this very popular website. The site also includes writings by Max Weber, another prominent theorist whose work is featured in the first selection, and these writings are available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/index.htm

The World Values Survey (WVS):

http://worldvaluessurvey.org/

- This website provides a link allowing you to download the very data that the researchers in our first selection use, along with more recent data and other resources.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR):

http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr

- Widely used in research in criminology, the FBI's UCR is referenced in the second reading selection in this unit. Under the Stats & Services tab on this website, you can find data on crime, law enforcement, and other related areas.

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