# HOW TO STUDY SOCIAL LIFE

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Russell Hitchings** is a Professor of Human Geography at University College London. His research focuses on everyday practice, energy consumption, and nature experience, and he's been lucky to study these themes in a variety of contexts all around the world. He's particularly interested in how we use talk to examine these topics, having done a lot of interviewing about them. He's also used focus groups, solicited diaries, observation, and survey methods when that seemed like a good idea. Originally from South Wales, he's now been in London, and UCL, for longer than he generally likes to think about.

**Alan Latham** is another Professor of Human Geography at University College London. His research focuses on sociality, social infrastructure, and the public life of cities more generally. He's studied those themes in all sorts of places around the world too. In undertaking this work, he's explored a range of research approaches – including the use of photo-diaries, diary-interviews, social contact logs, and video recording and analysis. He's interested in doing whatever works to get as close as possible to the realities of people's experience. Originally from New Zealand, he's also been in London, and at UCL, for quite a long time too.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book came out of our teaching at UCL. We think research methods are important. But we also think social research is fun. Over the years we've tried to convey that sense of enthusiasm to our students. We'd like to thank all the students who've taken our undergraduate field class, or our graduate methods course, or otherwise been taught these topics by us. We've tried out some challenging and unusual exercises with them. The less successful ones we're very happy not to share in the book! We really appreciate the openness with which they've taken on these ideas, and we hope they've come away with a similar sense of the methods adventure. We've also learnt a lot about the nitty-gritty of social research from our PhD, MSc, and undergraduate dissertation students, and we appreciate the continued support of our colleagues, some of them bravely visiting us as special 'guest stars' in our methods class. In developing our thinking around method, the work we've done with the geography journal *Area* has been a pleasure. Thanks to their support we've really enjoyed thinking about the importance of how we handle different method dilemmas with various friends and colleagues at the Royal Geographical Society conference. Alan would like to thank Derek McCormack with whom he taught a very early version of our current field class. He'd also like to thank Rita, Luisa, Thomas, and Lacey for their support whilst finishing the book. Russell would like to thank Rhod, Jane, and Larry for helping him out in a similar capacity. Thanks also go to our editors at SAGE, first Jai Seaman and then Charlotte Bush – professional and supportive throughout with some excellent nudging to help us get it done.

# 1

# INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS BOOK AND HOW TO USE IT

## SAYING HELLO

Hello!

That felt strange to write. Books don't often start by addressing the reader so directly. But, as you'll soon see, a large part of what this one is about is sharing tips and ideas about how to do enjoyable and effective social research. And the best way, we think, of doing that is with a little informality. So, we'll be writing in this way throughout. Whilst we're being informal, we should probably also introduce ourselves. We're two professors who do social research at a university in London. We've been in this line of work for a while now and, as you'll also soon see, we've experimented with various approaches along the way. We've also taught social research methods for several years, to both undergraduate and post-graduate students, and we've supervised quite a few related projects. You'll hear plenty about all those experiences too. That's because working with all of these students has pushed us to think harder about how to do effective social research and about how to persuade them (and now potentially you) of the value of thinking carefully and creatively about the activities involved.

## ANXIETY, INDIFFERENCE, ADVENTURE

Our teaching experience is also partly why we wanted to write this book. As social researchers, we like to think of ourselves as fairly attentive to how particular

situations are handled. Something that we've noticed over the years is how some of our students respond to the idea of spending time thinking about methods with us. For some, methods are a worry. When they get to the point when they must consider the practicalities, they get anxious about the idea of going out and engaging with people, maybe speaking to some of them, perhaps even taking part in some of their activities. Imagining people's reactions can make this prospect seem daunting and that can disincline these students from thinking much more about what they'll actually do. Others are just kind of uninterested when, since they're required to take our course, we suddenly barge into their lives and attempt to enthuse them about the joys of cooking up interesting and effective projects. They'd been debating some weighty issues in some of their other courses, and practical research matters can seem a bit dull after that. Both reactions have sometimes frustrated us, we'll admit. That's partly because, for us, the real excitement of our job as researchers is often all about working out, and then testing out, an original and effective strategy for studying aspects of social life. To those who are anxious, we say that, with a little thought, they'll do a very enjoyable and effective project. To those who are indifferent, we remind them that they'll never represent people with authority in their debates if they don't think hard about their methods.

Instead of brushing methods aside – seeing them as something to avoid because they're intimidating or to downplay because they're unexciting – we ask them to think in terms of an adventure, both intellectual and practical. As we see it, with methods we're on a journey in which we're gradually figuring out how to do a project that is interesting, worthwhile, and also delivers on our objectives. We don't always see this kind of approach in the readings we give to our students. Often the focus there is on the procedures involved in carrying out a method. That's certainly helpful. But the excitement of experimenting with different techniques and approaches to find out how we can make them work for us can get a bit lost. In this book, we want to put these ideas of adventure and experimentation front and centre. We'll be using lots of examples of studies we've been involved with ourselves, interesting studies we've read about, and various exercises we've cooked up for our students, to underline and explore the potential of reflecting on the essential activities involved in a social research project. When we do social research, we meet people we might not have otherwise met. We learn the realities of how things are working out for them. We find out about how they see things. We get to see what they think of, and how they respond to, various others and different situations. This is exciting stuff.

## WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

We like to think this book has something for social researchers at all levels. We've both done plenty of social research. But we're also constantly learning about

how to do this work from others, including the undergraduate and post-graduate students we teach. So, as well as an adventure, we also see social research as a craft. It takes time to learn and become skilled at it. Even if you're an experienced researcher there are always new ways of approaching your work. Seeing social research as a craft has actually been a godsend for us too. One of the groups to which we teach methods is a cohort of students doing master's level research focused on various problems (how to think about migration, the implications of urbanisation, how to handle environmental issues). One of the challenges we've faced there was that whilst some of these students had already done methods courses – some had, in fact, previously done all sorts of excellent social research projects – others are entirely new to the whole idea. To cater to this diversity, we decided to organise our course around the idea that we can all benefit from taking a fresh look at the different concrete activities involved in doing a social research project. And that's what we've tried to do in this book. We hope this will give you a candid and helpful introduction if you've never done any social research before whilst also giving those with more experience some new ideas about how to tackle their next project. So, this is, we like to think, a book for anyone interested in social research. We're all figuring out the right ways of studying people. And thinking about the essential activities can help us all to pull off original and effective projects.

But what is studying social life? Well, for us, this is anything to do with understanding what groups of people do and think. They may have come up with these ways of living and thinking themselves. Equally, broader processes of social change and influence might be working through them. Which you prioritise depends on how you want to see things. Lots of academic disciplines do it too. We're human geographers, so that obviously shapes how we go about our work. But our disciplinary boundaries are pretty loose, and we've learnt a lot from sociologists, political scientists, educational researchers, environmental scientists, anthropologists, and others. You may also be wondering why you'd want to study people. Well, there are many possible answers here too. If you're passionate about particular issues elsewhere you might be keen on influencing what they do, perhaps so that you can encourage them to join you in tackling these issues. And that might mean learning about their perspectives first, or getting an appreciation of what they are already doing in certain contexts so that you can come up with better ways of engaging with them there. It could be about understanding where groups of people are coming from more broadly so that you can help them out. It could even be because you're just interested in learning more – being curious about others is generally a big part of this too. There are all sorts of research techniques we can draw on in response to these motivations. We'll cover many of them in the following chapters. And we'll also encourage you to think about how the methods you choose, and how you apply them, are linked to your wider purpose.

## AND HOW SHOULD YOU USE IT?

How should you use this book? That sounds like a familiar response from a time-pressured researcher. Fair enough! We'll admit that we're lucky in having the time to reflect on the practicalities. But we'd still encourage you to read the whole thing and to mull over the various ideas we'll introduce as we go along. It's the sort of book we'd quite like you to gradually work through as you develop your research plans. Our intention is not so much about quickly getting you up to speed with recognised methods – there are plenty of excellent books on that already. This book, as we see it, is more about comparing and considering the available options at the start. And even though you may already have some experience with particular methods – in the way that, as we've said, our students sometimes do – it's always a good idea to think about them all before you get too wedded to particular approaches. And so, even though this book is called 'How to study social life', we'd argue that the best answer to that question is to start by pondering all the different activities you might get stuck into, rather than picking a method that appeals and following the apparent rules associated with it. We've picked our title to emphasise that we're thinking through the options more than telling you what to do!

We'll admit that this book is not exhaustive either. There are many ways of doing social research. Some techniques are excluded. Others are covered in a particular way. What this book does do, however, is take a fresh look at some of the most popular social research activities and consider how we might tackle the challenges associated with each of them in original and effective ways.

## THE CHAPTERS

### Chapter 2. Warrants: Starting with What You Want Your Study to Achieve

People do social research for many reasons. Let's start with that. Still, it's not all that common that researchers reflect on their essential purpose in this way, though there's often a background hope that their work will be somehow helpful. Perhaps we should instead begin by working backwards from the impacts we hope to have in order to see what that means for our methods? Our first chapter is about getting you thinking about what could be called the 'warrant' of your study. We'll also work through how people might react to the results of different methods. Which kind of method fits with which kind of audience and what does that suggest about which methods are right for you? Our first chapter is a bit of a pep talk to get you thinking about the whole point. But it makes sense to start like this. After all, we'll never do a good job if we're unclear with ourselves about what we're trying to do.

## Chapter 3. Observing: On Learning to Learn from Different Social Scenes

Then we get down to business with our first practical activity. If you're new to a place and you've no idea how to engage with the people there, watching what some of them are doing can be a very good start. That's why we've put it first. Plenty of researchers take this approach too. But how exactly does it work? Observation sounds exciting. But you could soon feel rather differently if you go somewhere and start freaking out because you don't seem to be seeing anything either interesting or relevant. Our second chapter considers the value of studying social life through observation, gives you some tips about how to do it well, and works through some interesting case studies to help you see how you'd make it a success: how to notice, and then usefully analyse, some of the actions of people *in situ*.

## Chapter 4. Taking Part: Considering the Benefits of Getting Involved Ourselves

OK, so we can benefit from watching what people are up to. Hopefully, Chapter 3 has persuaded you of that. But could we get ourselves even closer to the action? Plenty of other researchers do that too. So, what might we learn if we personally get involved in a social setting or practice that interests us and how exactly do we put this interesting method into practice? In our fourth chapter, we'll consider these issues along with the various motivations for taking part in the first place. For some researchers, it might involve gaining a basic sense of the practicalities involved in structuring activities or places. For others, it might be more about building trust. And for yet others, taking part allows them to really appreciate the embodied experience of an activity or environment. Drawing on examples from various researchers who thought they should get involved themselves, we'll consider how you can enjoy taking part in social life whilst also ending up with insights you wouldn't otherwise get.

## Chapter 5. Staging Talk: How to Do and Imagine Interviews

Talk is fundamental to much social research – humans are defined by their use of language, after all. However, the talk that social researchers 'stage' comes in many forms. Our fifth chapter starts by highlighting the many things that are going on when we speak with someone in a social research project. Then we'll give you a heads-up about how to make interviews work and the issues we'd encourage you to consider so as to pull off an effective interview. With those tips in place, we'll then think a bit harder about what to focus on in our talk with people.

Are interviewees responding to a challenging interaction that must be managed in certain ways as a means of handling this situational strangeness? Are we asking people to surface aspects of their lives they might not otherwise think very much about? Perhaps people are telling us the stories they live by when we talk to them – narrating an account of how they came to act or think in some ways instead of others? Interviews are sometimes framed as an opportunity to get 'rich' data from our respondents. Though this may be true at a general level, there are also different kinds of richness and different ways of getting it.

## Chapter 6. Engaging People: Seeing Social Research as a Relationship

Next, we consider the benefits of seeing social research as a relationship. What kinds of 'roles' might we assume when forging new, albeit often temporary, relationships with people as part of this? And what are the implications of assuming different ones? These themes are prominent within interviews, but also common across many research techniques. In our sixth chapter, we'll consider the different ways that researchers might go about 'engaging' others – both to enrol them into our research endeavours and to encourage them to show or tell us useful things about what we are researching. We explore these issues not just because we should treat people appropriately and respectfully and in ways that show suitable gratitude. We do so because this can also suggest some tricks for working most productively with them. Some researchers play up their differences. Others aim to find common cause with people as a means of gaining trust. Drawing on examples, we'll think through the value of different strategies at different stages and show how an awareness of their impacts can make for better studies.

## Chapter 7. Asking Questions: Exploring a Basic Act that Features in Many Methods

Like talk, it's pretty obvious that social researchers might be keen on asking questions. But the many ways in which they might do that can sometimes be overlooked because of exactly this obviousness. So, how should we pose our questions and what does that mean for how people will likely respond? How are we reproducing particular ideas, when we compose our questions, that sometimes means we don't end up learning all that much in our studies? We have questions about questions! In exploring them in Chapter 7, we'll stray across the borders between traditional method distinctions – this time, that which is often erected between methods like social surveys and others like interviews and focus groups. We'll work through particular styles and types of questioning to think about what's happening when we draw on each of them. We'll also, as with most of our

chapters, give you some tips and suggestions about how you might think creatively about the kinds of questions that could really work for you.

## Chapter 8. Playing with Words: Strategies for Seeing and Exploring Patterns

Often the result of asking all our questions or writing lots of notes is banks of words. What to do with all of those? This chapter turns to how we can organise our response to the written word. We'll look at both the words we've produced ourselves and the many possible sources of writing already out there in the world that social scientists might want to examine. We'll give you a sense of how this can work, consider the importance of paying attention to what exactly you're doing, and give you some ideas about how you might do it in different ways. Chapter 8 is partly about what practitioners often call 'coding', which might sound a bit scarily scientific. But our point is more that this is essentially about slowing down so you can see the patterns. So, what patterns should we look for? And where does that take us? We're playing with words here. But this kind of play is serious because, done well, it gives a new depth to our work. And without it, we can't really speak with confidence and authority about what we've found in our studies.

## Chapter 9. Looking at Pictures: Ways of Getting Drawn into Social Worlds

This chapter focuses on how and why photographs and photography might be used in social research. The aim here is not to summarise established protocols but rather to look across a range of techniques to consider the different benefits of using photography. Chapter 9 focuses on three main themes. Firstly, the ways that photography might help you to develop and deepen your sense of the social sites you're studying. How can photos lead us into a better appreciation of how these contexts function and are dwelt in by people? Secondly, how photographs might help to draw some of the people you're studying into productive and revealing conversations. This might involve us as researchers asking people to produce photographs as a means of allowing us to momentarily see the world as they do and appreciate the environments they encounter. Thirdly, how we might use photos in our final research reports.

## Chapter 10. Choosing: How Thinking about Cases and Samples Can Make for Innovative Projects

Having addressed the ways in which social researchers can work with people, Chapter 10 then steps back to consider how we choose what or who to look at

the first place. What are the dilemmas involved in choosing the right selection of people, or interactions, or practices, or moments to study? For some researchers, choosing happens 'on the hoof' as they think on their feet in response to the opportunities associated with the research site at hand. For others, there are some fairly fixed conventions about how these selections should be made. Comparing traditions and questioning some common sampling assumptions allow us to think inventively about how you might design your own project. We'll also give you a few ideas about how to deal with the sampling anxieties our students often harbour.

## Chapter 11. Writing: How to Present the Material We've Collected

Our final chapter considers how we translate what we've found into accounts and arguments that address particular audiences. We need to think about what we want to achieve – from making persuasive points to triggering emotions – in writing up our results. What kind of final research account do we want to produce? How long should our quotes be? What are we really doing when we present a vignette? By comparing examples of different writing strategies – and reflecting on how they'll likely be received by different readers – we go back to the 'warrants' we introduced in Chapter 2. The basic idea is that, in order for us to do the studies that are right for us, we need to think about what we want to achieve with our written outputs. We'll also explore some of the most common issues of concern at this stage. What words to use to describe those we've studied and what should we call ourselves? How might we use theory to help us out? What are references for and when should they be used? And, finally, how do we even write the thing?

## Coda: The People Who Inspired Us and Ideas for Further Reading

For those interested in digging further into the methods discussed in the preceding chapters, or who are curious about our inspirations, we finish up with some further readings. Taking each chapter in turn, we provide an annotated list of some of the books and articles we've either drawn on extensively or see as good starting points for getting into the literature on each topic.

## Let's Get Exploring!

You'll remember what we said at the start about social research being an adventure. Well, let's get on and do some exploring then. In the chapters that follow

we'll be drawing on our experiences with a variety of fellow explorers. You'll hear quite a bit about our undergraduate field class on ways of studying everyday life in cities, that master's level course we've already introduced, and a variety of student and PhD projects we've helped out with, and our teaching with undergraduates to prepare them for doing dissertations also gets a mention. As we also said earlier, this book isn't intended to be exhaustive. But it does aim to demystify the activities that social researchers most often do and help you to put them to use in effective and innovative ways. It's the book we wish we'd read before we started out ourselves. We hope it helps you as you plan for and embark upon some of your own social research adventures.

# 2

# WARRANTS: STARTING WITH WHAT YOU WANT YOUR STUDY TO ACHIEVE

## THREE PIECES OF EVIDENCE

> The ball bounces towards Polo with the mouth of the goal wide open in front of him. His team is down by one goal and time is running out in the pick-up soccer game in a West Los Angeles park. He winds up to smash the ball into the back of the net. But perhaps reveling in his game-tying goal just a little too soon, he pulls back and sends the ball over the cross bar.
>
> '¡Barusa!' (Garbage!)
>
> '¡Estúpido!' (Stupid!)
>
> '¡Viejito!' (Old timer!)
>
> 'Jugador de parque!' (Park player!)

These are the opening lines of David Trouille's *Fútbol in the park: Immigrants, soccer, and the creation of social ties* (2021), a study of working-class, Latin American, migrant men in Los Angeles. This description of a moment at the end of a casual football – okay, soccer if you must – game introduces readers to the key characters in Trouille's study. It also introduces them to its key themes: community, masculinity, and how public parks sustain social networks for Latino migrants. His description presents a distinctive illustration of a certain style of social research, an empathetically oriented style of engaged research that invites readers into the world of those being written about.

Now look at the map in Figure 2.1. This presents some results from a rather different research mode. The map is from Eric Klinenberg's *Heatwave: A social autopsy of disaster in Chicago* (2002). It compares the relationship between violent crime rates and death rates during the 1995 Chicago heatwave and shows how that varies. The map reveals to the reader – and Klinenberg – that there's some kind of relationship between a neighbourhood's crime rate and the number of deaths likely to happen within it during this kind of extreme weather event. But it also hints that there is much more evidence that is going to need to be examined before any conclusion might be reached on the nature of this relationship. So, though we know less of the lived experience, Klinenberg's map suggests that patterns of inequality or injustice might be entangled with who lives and dies in a heatwave.

Other pieces of evidence might more bluntly speak to an injustice in different societies. Take our third piece of evidence. The following interview quote comes

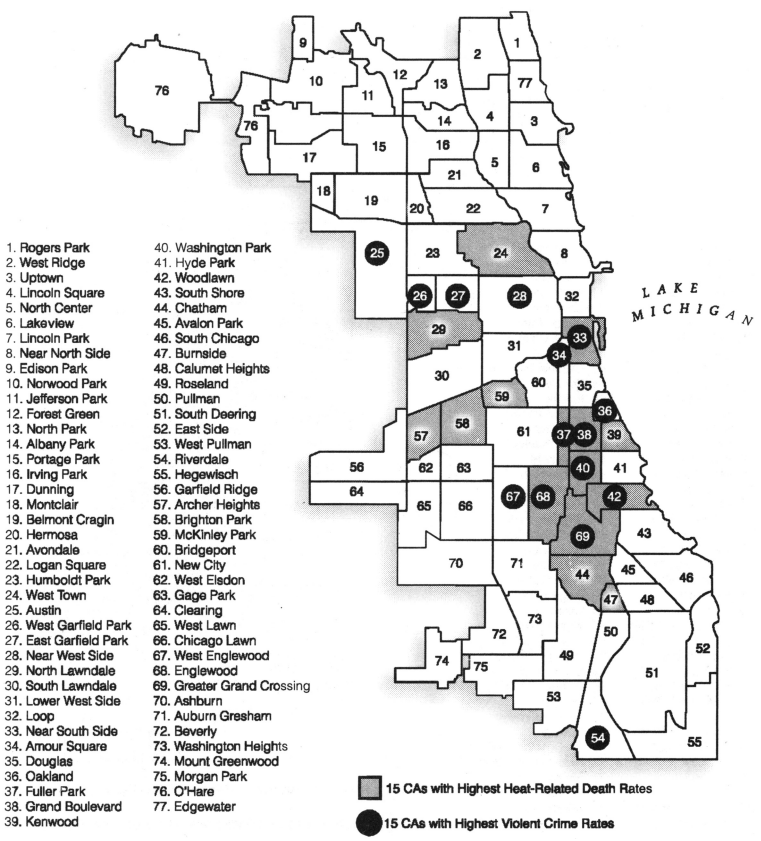


**Figure 2.1** Comparing heat-related mortality and crime rates across Chicago
Source: Klinenberg, 2002, figure 24, p. 83

from Sarah M. Hall and colleagues' report: *Intersecting inequalities: The impact of austerity on Black and minority ethnic women in the UK* (2017):

> 'At uni there's not many people from my background – most of them don't have to work, I have to work to put myself through. The opportunities they get, if there's like an internship to New York, they can just go, because they don't have to worry about money, whereas that is a problem for me.'
>
> (Interview, Manchester) (p. 36)

The reader is immediately confronted with the stark reality of how university study can be experienced quite differently by those from economically straitened families compared to those from wealthier ones. We feel the resignation of the interviewee about what others can easily do but is impossible for them. This interview extract – like many of the others collected in the report – helps to hammer home how certain groups particularly must contend with the inequalities that run through UK life.

We'll return to these three examples to help us develop some suggestions about how we can make sure we do social research that fits with our underlying aims. As social researchers, we often start out with rather grand ideas about what we're going to do. There's nothing wrong with that – doing good social research is hard, so you'd expect people to have a powerful sense of purpose to get them through the challenges they'll inevitably face. But that does make it especially important to be sure about what you're trying to achieve, especially when there are many underlying motivations to choose from.

At the start of our master's level methods course, we ask the students why we might want to do social research in the first place. And we get a lot of different answers. Our students are a smart and lively bunch and they always impress us with the variety of answers they come up with. Still, the exercise can also sometimes be challenging for them at the start, as it can be for many of us. We've often a background mix of purposes that we don't always subject to scrutiny. Our students eventually tell us that we might do social research to shape policy, explore the world, create new knowledge, test theories, find solutions to problems, see what's going on, question vested interests, debunk false ideas, solve disputes, tell new stories, generate new theories, verify concepts, give voice to others, and even to understand ourselves. There's quite a lot going on there – quite a lot of possible purposes.

These are all good reasons for doing social research. But this variety also poses questions for the budding social researcher: How should they decide which is the right reason for them? And how do different approaches fit with different ambitions? From their list of ambitions, it's tempting – comforting certainly – to conclude this is probably about personal preference; that the answer depends on the kind of person that we are. That's helpful and true up to a point. However, we

tell them that we want to dig into things a bit more deeply. If there are a range of ways of doing social research – in terms of how we both undertake our projects and present our results – perhaps we need to start by identifying our essential aims since different aims can take us towards different methods.

## THE WARRANTS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Some years ago, Jack Katz (1997) wondered about how researchers might justify their way of studying social life when speaking with others. Katz does a similar kind of research work to the soccer study in seeking to make sense of a group, institution, organisation, or place through detailed descriptions of the everyday practices and understandings of those involved. The research accounts – journal articles, books, policy reports – produced through such research run the risk of presenting nothing more than what the insiders under investigation already know. And if they simply tell us what those on the ground already know, then the reader might reasonably ask, 'So what?' This is an important challenge for social researchers, especially when the power of the research method into which they've trained means they often overlook these 'so what' questions, since to them the value of their endeavours is obvious.

For Katz, we'd be wrong to dismiss such 'so what' questions. Why? Because considering such basic questions forces us, as social researchers, to explicitly consider the 'warrants' that underpin our work. As you might know, a warrant is a justification for an action or belief. In law, a warrant is often a legal document that sets out the legality of an action – a warrant for someone's arrest, or a search warrant for the police to search a property. In social research, warrants, the justifications for why our research is being carried out, are rarely so explicit. More commonly they're part of the assumed shared understanding of what makes for worthwhile research within different research communities. Katz's argument is that if a researcher is aiming to convince others of the value of their efforts – which they should – they need to reflect on the warrant of their study when presenting their work, not least because different warrants speak to different justifications, and potentially different audiences.

Pretty much all social research tends to take its warrant for granted. This can be an issue not just for uninitiated readers who may find themselves confused about the point. But it's also one for experienced researchers. It's important to think carefully about this because there are many possible warrants – and many ways of justifying the value – of the research done. Our student poll suggested that these warrants can run from informing government policy to questioning vested interests, from articulating the challenges faced by others to generating new theories of social life. Different warrants can pull us in different directions, demanding different styles of investigation, of analysis, and of final presentation.

It can be tempting to take a maximalist approach – to claim that the research delivers on many warrants at the same time. After all, what researcher wants to be pigeon-holed? The pitfall in taking such a stance is that, by trying to claim too many warrants, a piece of research, be that the whole project or an individual piece of writing, may be less effective in addressing any one of them.

There are some places within the social sciences where the purpose and methods for doing research are more or less non-contentious – everyone does broadly the same thing in a way that is reassuringly familiar. Economics, with its particular interest in econometric models is one, the part of social psychology that undertakes tightly defined experiments is another. But, in many other areas, and certainly in the worlds of human geography and environmental studies that we inhabit, there is no single agreed general warrant for undertaking social research, rather there are multiple overlapping warrants. We think we can see three broad types of warrants circulating through the work of social researchers.

## Just Understanding Something

A first group of warrants focuses on the basic idea of deepening our understanding of an issue or topic. This is perhaps the classic understanding of what social researchers are about. We – and by the way we are assuming you are also a social researcher or someone with aspirations to be one – are motivated to study the social world because we want to understand it better. This might be motivated by pure curiosity. More often, however, such social research is also motivated by a parallel warrant: that by understanding something we can improve things in some way. Klinenberg's *Heatwave* is in many ways an exemplary case study. *Heatwave*'s overall aim was to use the tools of social research to understand who dies during hot weather events, and why some people died whilst others survived. Through a well-designed combination of area-based analysis, in-depth interviews, and on-the-ground observation, he discovered that age, social isolation, economic deprivation, high local crime rates, and poor neighbourhood amenities interacted in various ways to put people at risk. In tracing out the relationships between individual and neighbourhood vulnerability, he didn't just provide an improved understanding of the effects of extreme weather events like heatwaves in cities. He also pointed to a range of policies to mitigate the effects of such events in the future.

## Witnessing or Giving a Platform to a Group

A second warrant is about witnessing or giving voice to a group. Contemporary societies are complex and hierarchical. Yet it is easy to think that the way we go about organising ourselves or making sense of life is the same as everyone

else's. Actually, the everyday lives of other groups are often puzzling. Often the ways of life of minority groups are framed by the majority as anti-social, deviant, or destructive. Equally, other practices or groups may simply be overlooked or ignored, meaning they receive inadequate societal recognition and resource. Addressing this, a second warrant for many social scientists is to bear witness to or to bring forward such marginalised groups or practices. Through a careful and respectful engagement with the people involved, these researchers are animated by the idea of demonstrating the nature and value of the way of life being researched. The Latino migrants in Trouille's *Fútbol in the park*, for example, are often seen as problematic by neighbourhood residents and other park uses. This is perhaps unsurprising when the pitch on which they play is in an affluent, middle-class area that is overwhelmingly white. For many, the presence of so many boisterous, Spanish speaking, working-class men is intimidating. Trouille's study shows the importance of daily park soccer matches for participants. It also demonstrates the effort the soccer players make to be responsible park users, and how they're adjusting their actions in response to the existing park use rules. What can seem from outside to be a somewhat chaotic setting is, in fact, carefully – if informally – regulated. In writing about the migrant soccer players he's spent a great deal of time with, Trouille provides a window into the lives of a frequently stigmatised group. He also shows how the men in the study have become a part of the everyday fabric of a Los Angeles community, along with the work they've put into this.

## Highlighting Injustice

A final group of social researchers sees social critique as the key warrant for its research. This kind of critical researcher is motivated by highlighting or revealing inequalities and injustices. The aim, for example, of the report by Hall et al. is to show how exactly Black and ethnic minority women have been disproportionately affected by changes to the United Kingdom's social benefit system after the recession that started in 2008. It does this through both presenting a statistical analysis of the differential impact of cuts to a range of benefits, alongside excerpts from focus group interviews with Black and ethnic minority women. Interview quotes, like the one we presented towards the start of this chapter, highlight the experience of living as a Black or ethnic minority woman at this time. It reveals how it feels to be the subject of the injustices of these cuts. The point of revealing or highlighting injustice is not simply to provide a dispassionate account of what is going on. For researchers working with the warrant of social critique, they hope to move the reader into some kind of action to change or transform the world. In fact, the warrant of social critique almost always reaches past the scope of the material presented. Revealing cases of injustice doesn't just expose

what is wrong in the case in hand, it also points to the ways society is more broadly unjust. The report doesn't just tell the reader about the unequal impacts of a decade of benefit cuts on Black and ethnic minority women in the UK, it also highlights how these women are fundamentally disadvantaged in British society.

Before we go further, it's important to emphasise that these three groups often overlap. And there are also – as our students told us – others. In that sense, this is more about thinking through those to which we are drawn. For now, the point is to recognise that different warrants can lead to different approaches. If we want to give people a platform, then we can start by seeing how their lives go on. If we want to understand how something works, we can collect data and then hopefully that will help us to do that. If we want to document injustice, perhaps we can simply ask about how that is experienced.

## WHAT DATA DOES

So far, we have emphasised how it's important to get your warrant straight when you are starting off with a social research project. This isn't always clear to many researchers when they do their studies. But knowing what you want to achieve will help you achieve it. Another way of thinking through these issues is about reflecting on different ways of engaging with audiences. Different methods present different possibilities for connecting with those who we hope will take an interest in our work. With that in mind, let's return for a final time to our three evidence examples to reflect on how they speak to us and to others who might, if the researchers have done their job thoughtfully, take an interest. Many, though not all, researchers would call this their 'data'; it represents the raw material out of which we develop our accounts of the social world. So, what do different forms of 'data' do?

### The Footballer's Friend

Let's return to the soccer match. It's worth saying here that this excerpt comes from a book. Books presuppose a particular kind of engagement on the part of the reader. We know we are in for the long haul with a book. We're settling down to a slow, hopefully expert exposition. This fits well with the kind of data that Trouille has produced. He is telling us a kind of story, and the authority to speak about his soccer group is granted gradually by the reader as we are drawn into a world described so well that we cannot help but believe this is the truth of the situation. Writing quality really matters here, so that it is worth thinking about if we hope to emulate such a study. But it's also about the material that Trouille has assembled. Being there, and paying attention to the detail, provide the nuances

and asides that colour his account and bring it alive. We're living that moment on the soccer field along with them. We're gradually coming to know individuals within the book pages – Polo, Motor, Roberto, Valderrama, Mi Chavo, Titi – and perhaps even coming to care about them. Different audiences will respond in different ways to Trouille's invitation into their lives. Other researchers will perhaps enjoy the feeling of being taken along on such a journey, but they'll also be wanting to know sooner rather than later what that means for how they should think about masculinity or park management. Perhaps members of the public might have more time. They might enjoy certain forms of writing where the aim is to entertain as much as to impress intellectually, and the way in which the writing transports the reader into the situation could be especially exhilarating. If we put them into other people's shoes, they might learn to think in new ways about broader political issues and question their standpoints. Finally, it could also be worth addressing those who are in a position to effect change – government officials, charities, campaigning groups. But can we see them reading this book in the office when they need to be working efficiently and effectively? Perhaps if the author is lucky and the policymaker really cares about their work, the book might find its way onto their bedside table where it could help to solidify their passion for change and thereby eventually seep into their working lives back in the office.

## The Graph or Map Maker

The graph or map is easy to handle even if it took a great deal of effort to produce. These devices feel authoritative. It seems hard to contest them because the workings are hidden away as we are drawn into particular ways of seeing the issue. We can also present it quite easily. We can imagine the graph going down better in the policymaker's office because they need to know the facts more than read a book. In that sense, the graph or map maker is partly showing respect to their audiences by going to the trouble of making something that clearly illustrates some finding or another. They don't want to waste people's time with depictions that don't tell them anything. There are no doubt emotional stories in the experiences that eventually gave rise to the data that informed the graph or map. Indeed, if we allow ourselves to dwell upon the meaning of the graph or map, the lived experiences that made some of the black circles bigger than others are harrowing to imagine. Still, the tone here is professional, and the numbers and scales suggest a confident platform for action – we know where they had it worst and we should target our efforts there if we want to avoid more deaths as climate change continues to kick in. The mechanism seems clear and the course of action seems obvious. A statistic about how location shapes the death toll might also be easier to circulate on social media platforms in ways that elicit a response partly based on how statistics such as these are imbued with a sense of authority.

### The Report Writer

Contemporary societies have many institutional layers. This means that there often isn't a single policy audience, but many. Still, to write effectively for your chosen audience requires thinking carefully about the characteristics of the particular audience you wish to address. Take the report on ethnicity (Hall et al., 2017). This directly addresses policymakers; it's a report after all, and a report has different conventions to a book or an academic paper. As with the graph and map, the idea is that the reader may not have too much time to delve into the social world under scrutiny and therefore needs to be told the facts of the matter quickly and efficiently. The report has an executive summary at the start – a set of bullet points, or 'headline findings' for the imagined executive who has lots of other things on her desk. Some of the most important and arresting facts are written in red inside boxes with borders that attract the eye. But rather than being directed at central government – those politicians and civil servants who had fashioned the policies of austerity in the UK – the report aims to inform other organisations working in social policy, such as NGOs and local authorities, of the unequal impacts. To reach this audience the report draws on well-known social research techniques and uses quotes from interviewees to speak for themselves. It doesn't complicate its discussion with intricate academic arguments either. If as a social researcher your warrant is to speak directly to those making policy, then writing simply and directly is crucial. But in presenting these quotes, the report sits somewhere between the soccer study and the heatwave map in the sense that there is an attempt to address the reader on an emotional level – by showing how the respondents spoke of their challenges in their own words, with the resignation we highlighted just a moment ago – whilst also speaking directly to possible responses.

As a quick side note, it is perhaps worth stressing at this point that we're interested in this chapter in different 'tropes' of presenting social research, using the three evidence examples to consider how they address specific audiences. Though our students often end up using single methods, Klinenberg's *Heatwave* presents a nuanced argument that, as well as using maps and statistics, draws on many in-depth interviews. Hall et al's. report also includes a wide range of different forms of evidence.

## CONCLUSION

Many researchers don't spend all that much time thinking about the warrant that underpins their research. Rather they often end up being well versed in specific approaches and techniques, either because those are the techniques that appealed to them at the start of their careers, or because they have been recruited

into particular cultures of working that predominate in their fields. In this primer chapter, we've argued that, perhaps especially when you're starting out on your social research journey, it's worth reflecting on what you want to achieve with your work and how effective particular forms of data may be in helping you with that. Many researchers are guided by multiple warrants but that doesn't mean we shouldn't think about them. Perhaps that means that we particularly should.

Ultimately, whether a social research project is good or bad rests on whether it delivers on its warrant – whether it provides the evidence that allows it to speak in the right ways to its intended audience. And, whilst the discipline you work in will have certain rules and expectations, hopefully you're interested in studying social life not just to reassure them that you've learnt their rules. You're also trying to do something in the world. So, before we get stuck into the techniques you might feasibly use in your studies, thinking about these issues can help with that. In effect, we've asked you to think backwards to your fundamental ambitions and forwards to how different audiences might respond to your results. We'll say more about writing in Chapter 11. But before we get started on the nitty-gritty of specific techniques, it's good to check in regularly with yourself about these questions. In this book we'll attempt to enthuse you about a variety of practical tools for doing social research. But the right way of studying social life for you ultimately rests on the warrants that underpin your research.