

# Constructing Social Research

*The Unity and Diversity of Method*

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## The Process of Social Research: Ideas and Evidence

### Introduction

Social research, in simplest terms, involves a dialogue between **ideas** and **evidence**. Ideas help social researchers make sense of evidence, and researchers use evidence to extend, revise, and test ideas. The end result of this dialogue is a representation of social life—evidence that has been shaped and reshaped by ideas, presented along with the thinking that guided the construction of the representation. This chapter focuses on how the dialogue of ideas and evidence is structured and how it is conducted—how ideas shape the understanding of evidence and how evidence affects ideas.

A major part in the dialogue of ideas and evidence is devoted to the analysis of the phenomena the researcher is studying. The term *phenomena* refers simply to facts or events. **Analysis** means breaking phenomena into their constituent parts and viewing them in relation to the whole they form. A researcher conducting an analysis of a revolutionary movement, for example, might try to dissect it in a way that illuminates all the different forces that combined to make the movement (see Jenkins 1983). This analysis would examine not only the social groups that joined the movement (for example, peasants, workers, soldiers, and so on), but also the social groups that did not; the political and social context, the movement's ideology; and other factors that contributed to its formation.

In essence, the analysis of a revolutionary movement involves breaking it into its key component parts so that it no longer appears to be an amorphous, teeming mass of revolutionaries, but rather can be seen as a combination of key elements and conditions. These elements can be viewed in isolation from one another, and they can be understood in the context of the other parts. For example, the ideology of the movement could be examined both in isolation (What are the key ideas behind the movement?) and in the context of the major groups involved in the movement (How do these key ideas resonate with the concerns of each