

# UNIT 1

## Family in Caribbean

### Overview

We all, to some extent, have the makings of social researchers. We all see things around us in our social world and try to understand or rationalise them. Research is the systematic process of collecting and analysing information (data) in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon with which we are concerned or interested ([www.drcath.net](http://www.drcath.net), 2008). This unit sets the foundation or context for all the other units to follow. We will first examine what is meant by the term, Social Research. We go further and discuss the purpose of social research in society today and the role of the researcher in the research process. Two focal points of this unit are the main research traditions that have impacted social research and the two main approaches to conducting social research today. At the end of the unit you are expected to reflect on the concepts learned and how they impact your academic and professional life with regard to carrying out research.

The unit has four sessions, each of which will engage you in new knowledge, critical thinking and learning activities.

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Offer an informed view of what social research is.
2. Explain the purpose of social research.
3. Understand the philosophical foundations of social research.
4. Describe the various research traditions impacting social research.
5. Assess the importance of each research tradition to social research.
6. Explain what is theory.
7. Describe the two main approaches to conducting social research.
8. Reflect on the role of the researcher in the research process.

This Unit is divided into four Sessions as follows:

**Session 1.1:** What is Social Research and What is its Purpose

**Session 1.2:** Philosophical Foundations of Social Research

**Session 1.3:** Deductive and Inductive Reasoning in Social Research

**Session 1.4:** The Role of the Researcher in Social Research Process



## Readings & Resources

### *Required Readings*

Abbott, D. (2010). Sociology Revision – Methodology, positivism and interpretivism. Retrieved at: <http://tutor2u.net/blog/index.php/sociology/comments/sociology-revision-methodology-positivism-and-interpretivism/>

Babbie, Earl. (1986). *The Practice of Social Research*, Fourth Edition. Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Crotty, M. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.  
[http://books.google.com.jm/books?id=j4hXocGn1yIC&pg=PA42&source=gbp\\_toc\\_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com.jm/books?id=j4hXocGn1yIC&pg=PA42&source=gbp_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Levin, D.M. (1988). *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. London: Routledge.

Picciano, A.G. (2007). Introduction to research methods. Retrieved at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOqOcmG2-u0&feature=player\\_embedded#](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOqOcmG2-u0&feature=player_embedded#)

Trochim, W.M.K. (2006). "Research Methods Knowledge Base".  
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/contents.php>

The Social Researcher: What is Social Research? An Introduction. Retrieved at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3WylJLGBnI>

What is Social Research? Retrieved at: [www.drcath.net](http://www.drcath.net)

**You are also advised to locate and read:** Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

## Session 1.1

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# What is Social Research and What is its Purpose Today?

### What is Social Research?

Research is the systematic process of collecting and analysing information (data) in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon with which we are concerned or in which we are interested ([www.drcath.net](http://www.drcath.net), 2008). Social research involves social scientific methods, theories and concepts, which can enhance our understanding of the social processes and problems encountered by individuals and groups in society. Social research examines a society's attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, trends, stratifications and rules. The scope of social research can be small or large, ranging from the self or a single individual to spanning an entire race or country. Some common topics of social research include gender roles in the family, youth and delinquency, poverty, racism, sexuality, voting behaviour, policing and criminal behaviour.

Social research is not just common sense but rather it is based on facts which are supported by theory. It is a scientific process that:

- Involves the systematic collection of methods to produce knowledge
- Is objective
- Can tell us things you do not know or expect
- Consists of theory, hypothesis and observation
- Is sometimes called 'soft science' because its subject matter (humans) is fluid and hard to measure precisely. Human behaviour is not always predictable
- Is empirical research, that is, research based on observed and measured phenomena where facts are assumed to exist prior to the theories that explain them

## *What is the purpose of social research?*

Social research is used for three main purposes: (1) to explore a new idea, (2) to describe a current idea or event and (3) to test theory about an idea or event.

### *1. Social research for exploration:*

- You are unsure about a topic or issue and want further clarity and, understanding on this issue or topic.
- Develop tentative hypotheses and theories.
- Become familiar with basic facts, people and concerns involved.
- Formulate questions and refine issues for future research.
- Used if there is little literature available on a topic or issue.
- It is the initial research, that is, research on that issue or topic has never been done before.

### *2. Social research for description:*

- Presents a profile of a group, for example, a profile of the deportees in a country, or describes a process. It is used very often in applied research.
- Is used for general household surveys – describes demographic characteristics of the population, economic factors and social trends.
- Can also be used to gain an insight into the changing social and economic circumstances of population groups.

### *3. Social research for analysis:*

- Goes beyond simple description to model empirically the social phenomena under investigation.
- Involves theory testing or elaboration of a theory.
- Is used mostly in basic research.



## LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.1

View the following videos:

“The Social Researcher: What is Social Research? An Introduction” at the link below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3WylJLGBnI>

Introduction to Research Methods

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOqQcmG2-u0&feature=player\\_embedded#](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOqQcmG2-u0&feature=player_embedded#)

After viewing the videos, in the Unit 1 discussion forum discuss:

1. Why do we need and do research today?
2. The purpose research can serve for youth development?

## Session 1.2

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# Philosophical Foundations of Social Research

### Introduction

Philosophical considerations and positions underlie the social sciences. We must recognize that philosophical foundations and their emergent issues have a profound impact on methodology and empirical practice. Decisions that have to do with research design usually depend on philosophical perspectives or assumptions, such as the very fundamental decision to employ a quantitative design or an interpretive research design. The 'philosophy of social research' is thus a subset of the philosophy of social science, but also an important subject area that spans methodology and method.

Most times when we think about science, we have the idea of someone in a white lab coat working at a lab bench mixing up chemicals. A lot of our stereotypes about science come from a period when science was dominated by a particular philosophy -- positivism -- that tended to support some of these views. Today science has moved on in its thinking into an era of post-positivism where many of those stereotypes of the scientist no longer hold true. Today both positivism and post positivism exist and both continue to impact social research.

### How We View the Social World

All research is based on assumptions about how the world is perceived and how we can best come to understand it. This has to do with issues of ontology and epistemology. The term ontology concerns what is said to exist in some world, that which potentially can be talked about. Wand and Weber (1993) refer to ontology as "a branch of philosophy concerned with articulating the nature and structure of the world." Ontology therefore asks, 'what is the nature of the world?' The term epistemology according to Hirschheim et al., 1995 denotes "the nature of human knowledge and understanding that can possibly be acquired through different types of inquiry and alternative methods of investigation." Epistemology therefore asks, 'what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known?'

Ontological and epistemological questions are concerned with a person's worldview or one's stand on the world. Further, ontological and epistemological issues become related in the sense that the latter concerns how human actors and in this case social researchers may go about

inquiring about and making sense of the former. This is important to social research because the researchers view of the world will affect how he/she will first conceptualize social problems around them and secondly how they will attempt to make sense of these social problems.

Two different world views, objectivism and constructivism ground social research. A characteristic of an objectivistic worldview is the existence of objective, absolute and unconditional truths (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The objective meaning of a statement is given from a set of conditions of truth or falsity, and human understanding is a matter of knowing these conditions, requiring precise and unambiguous definitions and rational explanations relying on deductive logic. Hence, sense-making from an objectivist point of view is considered as rational analysis of data in a mental problem space and construction of deductive arguments of cause-and-effect (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995).

Alternatively, objectivism contends that realities are local and specific in the sense that they vary between groups of individuals (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Secondly, reality is actively constructed, that is it is not merely discovered. Hence, the distinction between ontology and epistemology is blurred, as what constitutes reality depends on a particular actor and his values (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The objective, value-free actor does not exist.

Thirdly, reality is socially constructed, that is, the constructions are not personal or technical (Dahlbom, 1992). Although perception and thinking necessarily is individual, the construction process involves other social and cultural artifacts and therefore inevitably becomes social.

Of course, nobody really knows how we can best understand the world, and philosophers have been arguing about that very question for at least two millennia now, so all we're going to do is look at how most contemporary social scientists approach the question of how we know about the world around us. In social research the two schools of thought, Positivism and Post-Positivism are based in the philosophical foundations discussed above. They are important perspectives for social research today.

## What is Positivism?

Positivists believe that social reality is stable and can be observed and described from an objective viewpoint (Levin, 1988), that is, without interfering with the phenomena being studied. The positivist versus post positivist debate in social research basically focuses on whether or not social research should be conducted in the same way that research is conducted in the natural sciences (for example, chemistry and physics). Let's begin by considering what positivism is. In its broadest sense, positivism is a rejection of metaphysics (study of the unknown). Positivism is a view that holds that the goal of knowledge is simply to describe the phenomena that we experience. The purpose of science is simply to stick to what we can observe and measure. Knowledge of anything beyond that, a positivist would hold, is impossible. Since we can't directly observe emotions, feelings and thoughts these were not legitimate topics for a scientific psychology. In Psychology for instance, B.F. Skinner argued that psychologists needed to



concentrate only on the positive and negative reinforcers of behaviour in order to predict how people will behave, everything else in between, like what the person is thinking, is irrelevant because it can't be measured.

In a positivist view of the world, science is seen as the way to get at truth, to understand the world well enough so that we might predict and control it. The world and the universe are deterministic. They operate by laws of cause and effect that we can discern if we apply the unique approach of the scientific method. We use deductive reasoning<sup>1</sup> to postulate theories that we can test. Based on the results of our studies, we may learn that our theory doesn't fit the facts well and so we need to revise our theory to better predict reality. The positivist believed in empiricism, that is, the idea that observation and measurement are the core of the scientific endeavour. There has been a long debate among scholars and researchers on whether positivism is suitable for the social sciences that study human behaviour. Opponents have argued for a more subjective interpretation of human behaviour.

## What is Post-Positivism?

Things have changed in our views of science since the middle part of the 20th century. Probably the most important change has been our shift away from positivism to what we term post-positivism. Post-positivism rejects the central tenets of positivism. A post-positivist might begin by recognizing that the way scientists think and work and the way we think in our everyday life are not distinctly different. Scientific reasoning and commonsense reasoning are essentially the same process. Scientists, for example, follow specific procedures to ensure that observations are verifiable, accurate and consistent. In everyday reasoning, we don't always proceed so carefully and systematically although, if you think about it, when the stakes are high, even in everyday life we become much more cautious about measurement. Think of the way most responsible parents keep continuous watch over their infants, noticing details that non-parents would never detect.

In sociology for instance, post positivists are referred to as interpretivists. Interpretivists or post-positivists take the view that since human beings think and reflect, scientific methods are inappropriate for the study of society. Unlike objects in nature, human beings can change their behaviour if they know they are being observed. So, interpretivists argue that if we want to understand social action, we have to delve into the reasons and meanings which that action has for people (Abbott, 2010). Further, they argue that only through the subjective interpretation of and intervention in reality can that reality be fully understood.

Table 1.1: Positivism and Post-Positivisms

<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Post-Positivism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research is scientific and is concerned with what is and not what we might want something to be</li> <li>• Researchers must be objective and not get directly involved in the object of their study</li> <li>• Studies the group rather than the individual</li> <li>• Knowledge about social reality is only true, valid and reliable if it can be directly observed and tested</li> <li>• Social reality can be predicted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The social world is constructed based on the meanings that we give to it</li> <li>• Social reality is created and recreated daily based on the meanings we give to behaviour</li> <li>• Society does not exist in an objective and observable form</li> <li>• Facts about social reality can be collected but these facts are always context specific which means they can change based on the context</li> <li>• Because of its ever changing and contextual nature, social reality</li> </ul>



## LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.2

Think about various behaviours, events and processes around you. Which can a positivist or post-positivist approach be applied to? Discuss with your peers in the discussion forum.



## Session 1.3

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# Deductive and Inductive Reasoning in Social Research

### Introduction

In social research we have two broad methods of reasoning: (1) the *deductive* and (2) *inductive* approaches. Both are used in research to establish hypotheses, one using a top- down approach (deduction) and one using a bottom-up approach (induction). However before looking at these two approaches, we must first know what theory is and more specifically social theory?

### What is Theory?

According to Abend (2008) theory is:

- A logically connected set of general propositions that establishes a connection between two or more variables.
- A world view or a way of seeing interpreting and understanding events in the world.
- An explanation of a specific social phenomenon that identifies a set of causally relevant factors or conditions.

*Social theory is:*

- A system of interconnected idea
- It condenses and organizes knowledge about the social world
- Systematic way of explaining how the social works and why
- Constantly being modified and changing (not static)

*Theories help us to:*

- Classify things: entities, processes, and causal relationships
- Understand how and why already observed regularities occur
- Predict as yet unobserved relationships

- Guide our research in useful directions and,
- Serve as a basis for action. “There is nothing as practical as a good theory.”

Theory is therefore important to social research methods as firstly, methods of social research are linked to the different visions of how social reality should be studied and secondly, research is produced to address a burning question or theory. Theories can thus be categorized by:

1. Direction of reasoning which can be Inductive or Deductive
2. Level of social reality that it is explaining which can be Macro/Meso/ Micro level

## Deductive Reasoning

Deductive reasoning works from the more general to the specific. Sometimes this is informally called a “top-down” approach. We might begin with thinking up a theory about our topic of interest. We then narrow that down into more specific hypotheses that we can test. We narrow down even further when we collect observations to address the hypotheses. This ultimately leads us to be able to test the hypotheses with specific data, a confirmation (or not) of our original theories. See figure 1.1 depicting the deductive approach:

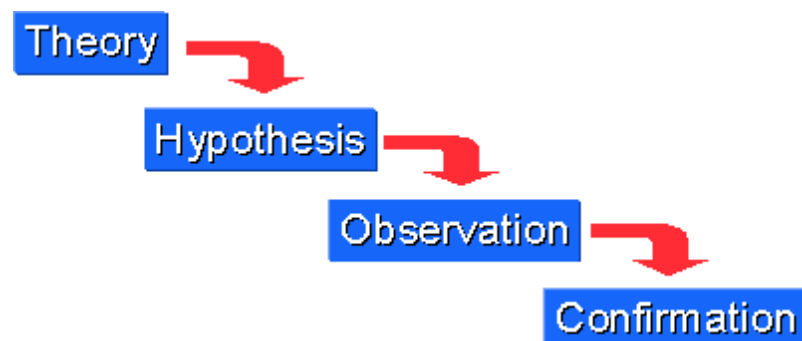
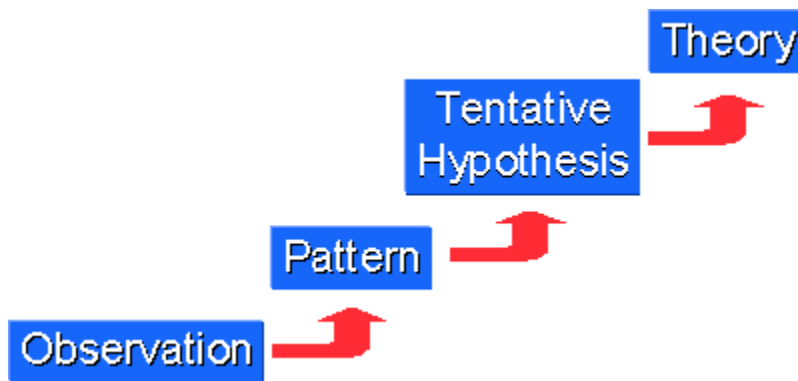


Figure 1.1: The Deductive Approach (adapted from Trochim, 2006)

## Inductive Reasoning

Inductive reasoning works the other way, moving from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. Informally, we sometimes call this a “bottom-up” approach. In inductive reasoning, we begin with specific observations and measures, then to detecting patterns and regularities, formulating some tentative hypotheses that we can explore, and finally to developing some general conclusions or theories. In this approach, conclusions are likely based on premises and there is some degree of uncertainty compared to the deductive approach. See figure 1.2 depicting the inductive approach:



**Figure 1.2:** The Inductive Approach (adapted from Trochim, 2006)

These two methods of reasoning have a very different “feel” to them when you are conducting research. Inductive reasoning, by its very nature, is more open-ended and exploratory, especially at the beginning. Deductive reasoning has a narrower focus in nature and is concerned with testing or confirming hypotheses.

Even though a particular study may look like it is purely deductive, for example, an experiment designed to test the hypothesized effects of some treatment on some outcome, most social research involves both inductive and deductive reasoning processes at some time in the research project. Even in the most constrained experiment, researchers may observe patterns in the data that lead them to develop new theories.



### LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.3

Discuss with your peers the following:

1. What is social research?
2. How can social research be applied in the field of Youth Work and Development?
3. Either:

Read Earl Babbie’s *The Practice of Social Research*, chapter 1 or

Conduct your own Internet search and answer the following questions:

- (a) What is the inductive method?
- (b) What is the deductive method?

### Session 1.3 Summary

- Induction is usually described as moving from the specific to the general, while deduction begins with the general and ends with the specific.
- Arguments based on laws, rules and accepted principles are generally used for deductive reasoning. Observations tend to be used for inductive reasoning.
- Deductive reasoning arrives at a specific conclusion based on generalizations.
- Inductive reasoning takes events and makes generalizations.

## Session 1.4

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# The Role of the Researcher in Social Research

### The Social Researcher's Role

In social research the researcher can play both a passive and an active role depending on the type of research that is being conducted. If we go back to the positivist view of research where it is believed that facts are collected and measured, then the researcher takes on a passive role and needs to maintain objectivity and neutrality. The researcher is viewed as independent of the participants in the research and so his or her assumptions, biases, views and experiences play no part in the research process. For example, a company wanting to test their customers' satisfaction with their products may conduct a general survey. In this case the researcher would administer the survey by telephone or mail questionnaires, collect the data which is then analysed and observations made. In this example, the researcher's role is that of neutral observer, analyzing the data collected.

From a post-positivist view, however, where research is viewed as aiming to find meanings within the particular social context, the role of the researcher is quite different. In this time of research where meaning is viewed as contextual, the researcher is vital to the research. The researcher's assumptions, biases, expectations and experiences are important to the research process. For example, a researcher who wants to study the gender and cultural patterns among Rastafarians in a particular community would spend some time within the community directly observing behaviours and activities and would in some cases be a member of that community and participant in daily activities. In this example, the researcher plays an active role by virtue of the fact that his or her feelings, attitudes, subjective understandings and interactions with the researched all come into play in analyzing the phenomenon.

Sometimes in social research, the researcher plays both roles. He or she may start as an outsider and then become a member of the group or organization being researched. The reverse may also occur, where the researcher starts as part of the group and then becomes a more objective observant to the group.





## LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.4

Review the PowerPoint presentation posted in the Unit 1 block on your course page. When you are finished,

Reflect and write what you believe is the role of the researcher in social research today. You may use an example of a research topic to make your reflections.

## UNIT SUMMARY

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The unit has provided a background to social research by discussing the main traditions to research and a discussion on why research is important today. We will see later on that these two main traditions impact all aspects of the research process including the methods that are used, the type of analysis conducted and the role of the researcher in the research process. The unit has also discussed two main approaches to reasoning in social research: induction and deduction. As social researchers, your orientation towards your research topic will most likely follow one or the other approach. This, however, is something that you will develop over time as you become more comfortable with conducting social research.

## References

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