Methodological Memes and Mores: Toward a Sociology of Social Research

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Abstract

A plethora of scholarly research has been conducted on social science: on its organizational and communicative patterns, on the historical development of research standards, and on the diversity of local research practices. But this body of work on the sociology of social research does not hang together in ways that it could, and should, if knowledge is to accumulate. Contributors hail from various fields, subfields, theoretical perspectives, and methodological bents, and there is no extant subfield to join, legitimate, and reinforce their mutual interests. Thus, the aim of this review is not only to summarize themes, identify gaps, and suggest fruitful avenues for future research, but also to serve as a unifying force for scholars interested in studying social science from a sociological perspective. The sociology of social research, far from being a trite exercise in navel-gazing, is critical for the future viability of sociology, for the discipline's legitimacy and autonomy, and for improving social research more generally.

> It is not at all unreasonable to view the results of social research as a dependent variable that is affected by the reality of what it is meant to study, and by other various technical matters that keep the study from being ideal, and also by the social context of the work itself.
>
> Stanley Lieberson (1992, p. 60)

> Sociology, which invites the other sciences to address the question of their social foundations, cannot exempt itself from this calling into question. Casting an ironic gaze on the social world, a gaze which unveils, unmasks, brings to light what is hidden, it cannot avoid casting this gaze on itself—with the intention not of destroying sociology but rather of serving it, using the sociology of sociology in order to make a better sociology.
>
> Pierre Bourdieu (2004, p. 4)

Research is a human activity, not immune to social influences, and social research is no exception. This is immediately clear from investigations of research practices in the natural sciences, which document the malleable and formative aspects of scientific facts and technical procedures (Knorr-Cetina 1999, Latour & Woolgar 1979, Lynch 1985). Perhaps owing to perceived risks of studying phenomena too close to one's self, only a small (but growing) number of social scientists have examined social research practices—the decisions that social scientists make as they go about their research, which may or may not be guided by methodological precepts. Turning a sociological eye toward our own research practices prompts questions: How, if at all, does everyday research practice diverge from formal approaches described in methods texts and research publications? How do social forces at micro, meso, and macro levels shape the way research is carried out? Why do some research practices spread and become dominant while others do not?

Several characteristics of social research and its practice encourage systematic inquiry. First, social research is a ubiquitous, everyday, common activity: As of 2004, almost one-half million individuals (491,700) in the United States alone were classified as social scientists (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Second, the demonstrated and potential influence of social research—on the public and on policy (Calhoun 2007, Gans 1989)—demands that social research be analyzed systematically. Third, social research practice is consequential: There are long-term ethical, methodological, and policy implications. For example, Porter (1995, p. 31) shows how population numbers depend on "the methods specified for getting them," and how socially organized and contingent categories (such as "Hispanic") are impressively resilient once they are put in place. For these reasons, it is important to ask how research in the discipline is supported locally and socially (Lynch & Bogen 1997) and to investigate the "underbelly of social research—those thoughts, actions, constraints, and choices that lurk beneath the surface of our well-dressed research publications" (Staw 1981, p. 225).

Indeed, much can be gained from studying social research from a sociological perspective. Describing, clarifying, and explaining the typically hidden steps of the research process encourage social researchers to be more methodical about matters that have been left largely to idiosyncrasy and circumstance (Kulka 1981, p. 176), thereby increasing transparency, attentiveness, and rigor. A better understanding of the social research process should also make it more learnable and transmittable (Becker 1998). In the past, the multiple small steps involved in research were disguised, learned only through experience; more recently, researchers are sharing their decisions, pitfalls, and surprises more openly (Hargittai 2008). Scrutinizing social research should also help improve evaluation efforts, which lie at the heart of scientific communication and progress (Roth 1973). It may also help break down what some see as false and unnecessary dichotomies: quantitative/qualitative, ideal/real, official/informal, and standards/practice (Peneff 1988). Methodological self-reflection, practiced by some of the most sophisticated quantitative methodologists, permits recognition of the subtleties of practice, which is laden with ambiguity

and discursive elements (Breiger 2002). Because research is a part of theory (Lieberson 1992) and research is conducted by members of all substantive subfields, induced sensitivity to methodology radiates into all fields of social inquiry and thus benefits sociological analysis more generally (Lazarsfeld 1962).

Addressing the social character and foundations of social research practice requires a realistic and skeptical perspective, but the goal is to improve—not debunk—social research. Rather than relativizing or discrediting scientific knowledge by reducing it to social or historical conditions, submitting social science to sociological analysis will check it and strengthen it, by enabling "those who do science to better understand the social mechanisms which orient scientific practice" (Bourdieu 2004, p. viii). This also provides a healthy antidote to philosophical studies of epistemology, which focus more on the truths of established science than on the errors of science in progress, and scientific activity as it actually is (Bourdieu 2004, p. 3).

Calls for taking social research practice as an object of inquiry are not new (Lazarsfeld 1962, Lieberson 1992), and scholars heeding these calls hail from a variety of eras, specialty areas, and methodological bents. Aaron Cicourel, Harold Garfinkel, Anselm Strauss, and Doug Maynard come from an ethnomethodological tradition. Nora Cate Schaeffer and Tom Smith represent the survey research tradition. Historians (Margo Conk, Theodore Porter) and sociologists interested in the history of sociology (Charles Camic, Jennifer Platt) have also turned their attention to social research methods and statistical practice. Other scholars, including Howard Becker, Stanley Lieberson, and Andrew Abbott, are methodologists in the broadest sense. This diversity in origin certainly makes the task of describing and assessing the state of scholarship on social research practice formidable (Kulka 1981), but more importantly, it presents challenges to the formal organization of such scholars, and the subsequent recognition and legitimation of their work. Without a common language, journal, or recognized specialty area for the study of social research practice, there are few opportunities for scholars working on this topic to learn of their mutual interests, share insights, and build on each other's work. This review is one step in the process of filling that gap.

Although traditionally focused on the natural sciences, the sociology of science has become more open to the study of social science and provides a foundation for the emerging sociology of social research practice. Indeed, there is overlap in the topics and practices studied, such as measurement (Maynard & Schaeffer 2000). But there are some reasons for distinguishing the sociology of (natural) science and the sociology of social science. As I discuss below, the sociology of social science uses a broader array of methods, including not only qualitative and historical research, but also experiments and surveys. And social scientists study phenomena that they themselves participate in; thus, the choice of problem and attempted solutions are likely influenced by the social scientist's personal experience as well as his or her audience (Cole 1994). While acknowledging social pressures that affect both the natural and social sciences, Lieberson (1989, p. 61) notes an additional pressure faced by the latter: the differential treatment received by results that clash with normative social views and results that support such views or are tangential to them. The social sciences are different enough, epistemologically, from the natural sciences (Hargens 2000) to warrant distinct empirical attention. This was corroborated in a study of fellowship review panels (Guetzkow et al. 2004), where conceptions of originality not found in the natural sciences (such as taking a new approach) were typical in the social sciences and humanities.

The goal of this review is to provide a comprehensive assessment and evaluation of the state of research on the sociology of social research and to identify topics ripe for further investigation. Toward this end, I begin by cataloging the range of social research practices that have been investigated to date. This descriptive effort is intended to draw together

a diverse set of practices that have been studied by a diverse set of scholars, over a long period of time. Unlike continual reviews of traditional subfields, this one is not restricted to recent works. But like most reviews, it is necessarily selective. I highlight studies that take research practice—and especially variation in practice across time and space—as an interesting phenomenon that itself requires explanation, thereby underemphasizing a related body of literature on the methodological and ethical implications of research practices (see **Table 1** for a catalog of both kinds of studies). I then move into a more analytical discussion of the myriad social factors found relevant to the use, transmission, and dissemination of practice. Lastly, in order to suggest future research directions, I review the methods used (and not used) to study social research practice and identify important but understudied research practices. I end the review by proposing a series of potential research questions.

A PALETTE OF PRACTICES

Many practices related to the survey research tradition have been studied extensively. Largely based on a concern for declining response rates, some scholars have studied the practice of subject recruitment, focusing on the impact of researcher-participant interaction. Interviewing is arguably the research practice that has received the most scholarly attention, perhaps in response to early standardization efforts. As Maynard & Schaeffer (2000) demonstrate, detailed, ethnographic styles of observation and analysis have much to contribute to our understanding of survey research and often illuminate the social and interactional underpinnings of work done in survey research centers. Several contributions to the edited volume *Standardization and Tacit Knowledge: Interaction and Practice in the Survey Interview* (Maynard et al. 2002) illustrate this, as does recent work by Weinreb (2006), who highlights the importance of interviewer-interviewee relationships.

Table 1 Studies of research practices, by their stage of the research process and place in an explanatory model

	Place in explanatory model	
Stage in research process	**Research practice as an explanatory variable**	**Research practice as an outcome of interest**
Beginning		
Recruiting subjects	Houtkoop-Steenstra & van der Bergh (2002), Maynard & Schaeffer (2002a), Hoegeman (2007)	Maynard & Schaeffer (2002b), Couper & Groves (2002), Groves et al. (1992)
Collaborating	Moody (2004)	Moody (2004), Babchuk et al. (1999), Leahey & Reikowsky (2008)
Intermediate		
Interviewing subjects	Weinreb (2006), Dijkstra (1987, 2002)	Viterna & Maynard (2002), Smith (1978, 1982)
Data editing	Conk (1981), Sana & Weinreb (2008)	Leahey et al. (2003), Leahey (2004), Conk (1981), Sana & Weinreb (2008)
Coding	Kalton & Stowell (1979), Crittenden & Hill (1971), Felson (1974)	Garfinkel (1967), Garfinkel & Sachs (1986), Cicourel (1969, 1982), Conk (1981)
Statistical practice	Gerber et al. (2001), Gardenier & Resnick (2002)	Leahey (2005), Goldthorpe (2000), Abbott (2001), Ragin (1987, 2000), Lieberson (1985), Lieberson & Lynn (2002), Camic (1995), Porter (1995), Labovitz (1972)
End		
Referencing work	Ward et al. (1992)	Hargens (2000), Ferber (1986, 1988)
Evaluating research[a]	Bakanic et al. (1987, 1990), Crane (1970), Gerber et al. (2001)	Guetzkow et al. (2004), Leahey (2008), Hargens (1988), Gordon (1978)

[a]Evaluation of research takes place at beginning stages (e.g., ideas, proposals) as well as end stages (submitted manuscripts, published articles).

How data are cleaned and coded has been the focus of a number of studies. Ethnomethodologists were the first to consider the coding of qualitative text an everyday activity worthy of study. Cicourel (1969) entreated sociologists to consider how meaning is produced and comprehended during the collection and coding of research data, and a few sociologists heeded his call. Coding is a special case of managing, cleaning, and editing data—a common research practice that has been the subject of recent investigations by Leahey and colleagues (Leahey 2004, 2008; Leahey et al. 2003) as well as Sana & Weinreb (2008). Using vignette analysis, Leahey et al. (2003) documented the diverse approaches that social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists) take when confronted with messy, dirty data. This lack of standard methods for editing data distinguishes this practice from practices such as interviewing, which are often a response to standard protocols.

As investigations of coding (of qualitative text) and data editing (of numeric survey responses) make clear, both qualitative and quantitative research practices have been the subject of scholarly investigation. Several scholars have studied the development and diffusion of quantitative social research, frequently highlighting statistical practice: how researchers use standard statistical techniques in practice and modify them to fit current and local exigencies. Because qualitative methods require flexibility, rely heavily on craft skills, and are more difficult to systematize and apply to fresh research situations (Platt 1996, p. 64), they have been scrutinized less than quantitative methods. But many qualitative researchers focus on the critical role of relationships and social context.

The practice of evaluating research—including ideas, proposals, and results—has also received a fair bit of scholarly attention of late. How do researchers evaluate their peers' work? How do funding agencies and fellowship panels make decisions about which research is most promising? And importantly, how do these practices reveal the ways in which research is conditioned by social forces? Guetzkow and colleagues (2004) acknowledge that diversity in evaluation criteria is "an important corrective that can have implications for the practice of research and peer evaluation" (p. 206). Diversity in approach and disputes over evaluation criteria are also intriguing to sociologists because they reflect legitimacy struggles, as members of different subfields and adherents of different methodological or theoretical approaches vie to establish or maintain their relative position in the field (Gerson 1983). Social researchers also evaluate research results in their roles as peer reviewers and journal editors. Diversity in this kind of evaluation (e.g., lack of consensus among manuscript reviewers) has been documented in sociology as well as other social scientific fields, although this may reflect the heterogeneity of submitted papers more than a lack of consensual standards (Hargens 1988).

Social researchers are implicitly evaluating the work of others when engaging in two other practices, collaboration and citation decisions, i.e., whom to work with and what work to reference. How researchers use previous research, and the collaborators they choose, tell us quite a bit about prevailing patterns of research activity and communication and about the larger disciplinary structure.

SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON RESEARCH PRACTICE

Various kinds of social forces affect individuals' research practices. In many areas and stages of research, formal guidelines do not exist, and even when standards do exist, they are not always applicable. As a result, uncertainty about how to proceed is common at various points in the research process. There are at least two implications of this uncertainty.

First, variability is rife, even surrounding standardized techniques such as survey interviewing. For some research practices, such as editing anomalous data, guidelines and standards do not yet exist, naturally stimulating diversity in researchers' approaches (Leahey et al. 2003). For other research practices, guidelines

and principles do exist. For example, survey interviewing guidelines suggest that questions should be read verbatim and that probes should be nondirect (Fowler & Mangione 1990). But even for this practice, standardization will never be perfectly and comprehensively achieved (Fowler & Mangione 1990, p. 9). Even when guidelines exist, variation typically remains because guidelines are often interpreted and implemented differently in different settings. If rules could be developed to cover every contingency, they would be too difficult to apply; thus, formal instructions must be accompanied by tacit knowledge derived from experience.

Thus, the second implication of uncertainty is that it leaves ample room for social influence. For example, to handle uncertainty, researchers likely rely on their previous experiences as well as the practices, advice, and presumed expectations of colleagues, mentors, and members of their visible (institutional, departmental) and less visible (specialty/topic area) communities. The processes that guide scientific research practice are often implicit and informal; research practice is conveyed to successive generations of scientists through example, discussion, and informal education (National Academy of Science 1992, p. 37). Tacit knowledge about how to engage in social research is learned through interaction, within communities of training and work. In other words, the form and content of research—including actions, discourse, and results—are "bound up with specific historical and cultural ways of life" (Lynch & Bogen 1997, p. 483). Moreover, "the interactional and material networks that support scientific innovations are infused with lines of authority, communal understandings, and practices and rhetorics of exclusion" (p. 483). In this section, I delineate the variety of social influences that inform, shape, and transmit research practice across individuals, settings, and time.

Interpersonal Interaction

Most research data are "derived from some kind of discourse" (Cicourel 1982, p. 11); thus, it is not surprising that interaction between individuals involved in the research effort and research participants is one of the most studied social influences on the research process. Fowler & Mangione (1990, p. 34) contend that even "engaging in standardized measurement is a social task." Peneff (1988) found this to be true in his study of interviewing techniques in a French survey research center, where actual behavior diverged sharply from official instructions. For example, talk was not limited to the official questionnaire, and negotiation and interaction allowed interviewers to distill responses into "something that can be written down" (p. 530). Interviewers, particularly the most adept ones, adapted their approach to changing situations and respondent types, in ways similar to field researchers.

Several studies highlight the importance of interaction between researchers and research participants. Chapters in the edited volume *Standardization and Tacit Knowledge* (Maynard et al. 2002) document the importance of rapport, turn-taking, situated action, and tacit knowledge that both interviewer and respondent bring to the interview. Such interactional resources typically have a positive effect on comprehension, coding, and resultant data quality, even though (or perhaps because) they diverge from standard protocol. Interaction, including opening statements and requests for participation (Maynard & Schaeffer 1997), is also critical to participant recruitment and retention (Groves et al. 1992). For example, when scripts are tailored based on cues (Couper & Groves 2002) and when introductions are agenda-based rather than standard (Houtkoop-Steenstra & van der Bergh 2002), subject recruitment is typically more successful. In his study of rural Kenya, Weinreb (2006) found that an extant social relationship between interviewer and respondent also affected the interview process: Insider interviews yielded better response rates and more consistent data across survey waves compared with stranger interviews, for which there is no prior relationship between the interviewer and respondent.

Interaction between researchers and research participants has been emphasized most

by ethnographers. Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, an engaged and reflexive approach to ethnography, hinges on the intersubjectivity of researchers and their subjects of study. Rather than controlling and limiting connections between researchers and those studied (and ignoring the gap between standard principles and practice), Burawoy prefers to take the research context as a point of departure and "thematize" our presence in the world we study (p. 7). In contrast to a positivist approach, he advocates an embedded approach to investigation that embraces human presence, influence, and interaction on the object(s) of study. Abbott's (2007) recently proposed "lyrical sociology" is similarly engaged with the subject and aims to communicate, rather than remove or ignore, the researcher's emotional stance toward the object of study.

Affiliations

Several studies have focused on how organizational affiliation affects the adoption and implementation of certain research practices. Leahey et al. (2003) found that data editing practice varied across disciplines and methodological communities. Psychologists were more amenable to discarding anomalous data compared with sociologists and anthropologists, and respondents with experience conducting flexible interviews were more likely to recommend editing the data as suggested, compared with those without such experience. In a later paper, Leahey (2005) documented institutional influences on the use of statistical significance testing: Department affiliation affected the likelihood of using statistical significance tests (e.g., scholars at Harvard were less likely to use such tests), and department prestige was positively related to the use of the now dominant 0.05 alpha level. Timmermans (1995) details how his research approach (qualitative) and discipline (sociology) profoundly shaped gatekeepers' and institutional review boards' (IRBs') evaluations of his research and thus what he could and could not undertake at a hospital field site. In addition to departments, disciplines, and methodological communities, researchers are attached to specialty areas—affiliations that develop their own mini-traditions of how things are done, and thus different patterns of "methods in use" (Platt 1996, p. 131). Both methodological and substantive community affiliations are bound up with gender (Grant et al. 1987, 2002), collaboration (Moody 2004), and patterns of scholarly conflict (Hargens 2000).

Organizations affect not only the use and adoption of certain techniques, but also how relatively standard techniques are carried out in practice. In a number of studies, Smith (1978, 1982) documented "house effects": differences across survey research centers in their interviewing protocols. For example, survey research centers differed in their approach to dealing with an initial survey response of "don't know": Some centers instructed interviewers to probe, whereas others encouraged interviewers to acknowledge "don't know" as an acceptable answer. In an in-depth study of 12 survey research centers, Viterna & Maynard (2002) documented variation in interview protocols (particularly regarding pace, specificity of probes, and frequency of monitoring) and noted the influence of local cultures on interview standards. Unlike most studies of research practice, Viterna & Maynard analyze not practice per se, but what interviewers are trained and supervised to do. By engaging in participant observation at training sessions, interviewing staff supervisors, and content analyzing training manuals, Viterna & Maynard were able to compare standardization in theory to standardization in practice.

Porter's (1995) work also documents the influence of institutional affiliations. He found that craft skills are developed in local research settings, mostly through discussion and interaction. These effects are particularly pronounced when anomalous cases that do not fit into standard classifications are encountered. For example, what is the appropriate occupational classification for "a retired dentist managing vacation rentals or a budding novelist who for the moment is waiting tables" (p. 41)? Porter agrees that job setting—or, more

specifically, the forms of expertise and power relations within a workforce—is critical to how research is carried out in practice. He illustrates this by contrasting commercial opinion polls, which enforced rigid standardization on interviewers and strict discipline on respondents, with academic studies of attitude, which were more concerned with flexible probing to obtain valid data. Porter argues that these divergent interview styles were closely tied to different forms of social organization. Academics, or their closely supervised and trained graduate students, did much of the research themselves, whereas opinion polls involved many large-scale studies with poorly paid assistants who were "not initiated into the arcane of the craft" (p. 34).

Professional Networks

Interpersonal interaction between researchers themselves—their professional ties within and across bounded communities—lies behind these documented affiliation effects. To elaborate this process, one must examine interactions and relationships with socializing agents more closely. Leahey (2006) found that advisors' approaches to some research practices—such as dropping anomalous observations and testing for statistical significance—were passed along to their advisees. Platt (1996) finds that "community exemplars" who interweave methods into their substantive work are most likely to influence the practice of ordinary researchers, for whom methods are instrumental rather than interesting in their own right. The importance of local, interpersonal interaction was also underscored in a study of a single graduate department (E. Leahey & J. Cabrera, unpublished text), where sharing an intellectual (specialty area) or a physical (office) community encouraged shared approaches to research. Camic & Xie (1994) underscore the importance of individual interaction across departments and disciplines in their analysis of the rise of statistics at Columbia University in the early 1900s.

More distant, extralocal professional ties also shape research practice. For example, disciplinary networks can influence a researcher's decision about which extant research to reference when writing an article or book (Stinchcombe 1982). Although individuals' skill sets and interests are relevant to decisions to collaborate, the synergistic collaboration itself likely shapes the research process and product as well. In his study of sociology articles published between 1963 and 1999, Moody (2004, p. 235) found that authors specialize, but their skills "marry well with others," contributing to a research process and product that would have been different if pursued solo. Leahey & Reikowsky (2008) found evidence of this style of collaboration in their study of sociology journal articles, especially those published in specialty journals.

Demographic Characteristics

Researchers' race and gender also shape research practice. In theory, it is only interviewers' training and professional demeanor that matter (Laumann et al. 1994). However, their sex (Catania et al. 1996), race (Hill 2002), and class (Garg 2005) have also been found to affect the interview process and the quality of the resultant data, leading some researchers to hire interviewers who belong to the same social category as respondents (Lee 2002). Grant and colleagues have studied women's research in the first half of the twentieth century (Grant et al. 2002) and found that gender influences choice of method (Grant et al. 1987); specifically, women rely on qualitative methods more frequently than men. Gender is also relevant to citation practices, as women tend to cite women more often than men do, and articles by women and articles on the topic of gender take longer to reach peak citation years (Ward et al. 1992).

Although social class may be less relevant to research practice than it once was, social standing still matters. An analysis of recommendation letters demonstrated that references to applicants' social class background were not as common as they once were (Tsay et al. 2003), suggesting that at least for evaluating (if not conducting) research, the significance of

social class has declined. However, many studies demonstrate strong effects of professional standing, or prestige. Leahey (2004) found that intraprofessional status influenced sociologists' assessments of data editing strategies: Respondents rated a graduate student's editing strategy more harshly than when a professor edited data in the same way. In a later study of the rise of statistical significance testing over the course of the twentieth century, Leahey (2005) found that the practice of elites, more than data characteristics (e.g., sample size), was critical to the development of dominant practices, such as the choice of a 5% alpha level. Bakanic and colleagues (1987) demonstrated that authors of higher rank and authors from more prestigious institutions also have a greater chance of having their papers accepted at the *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*).

In addition to more traditional demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and social standing, a few scholars have studied the influence of more psychological characteristics. Personal, moral qualities such as work ethic, energy level, and commitment to larger goals—which are typically viewed as particularistic or nonsubstantive factors that bias evaluations—are tightly bound up with judgments about the substantive quality, and originality, of scholarship (Guetzkow et al. 2004). And although experimenters' expectations and predispositions (i.e., demand characteristics) have been found to influence case selection, data entry, coding, and analysis (Webster & Sell 2007), double-blind experiments have been developed to limit such influences.

Societal Expectations and Individual Assumptions

The influence of societal norms and expectations has been most studied with respect to coding practice. Garfinkel's investigations (Garfinkel 1967, Garfinkel & Sachs 1986) of record keeping in a hospital ward revealed that coding was not independent of the socially organized occasions of its use, and assumptions about what was to be described via coding were integral to the coding process itself and the interpretation of the codes. Conk's (1981) study of the Census Bureau's occupational coding in the late nineteenth century corroborates Garfinkel's proposition. With the advent of machine-tabulated data that permitted consistency checks, bureau workers—possibly fearing their work would be rejected if there was a preponderance of individuals in sex-atypical occupations—recoded some men's and women's occupations to be consistent with societal expectations at the time. For example, women claiming to be locomotive engineers were recoded as "tailoresses," and those claiming to be railroad conductors were recoded as "society officials." Conk (1981) concluded that the existing sexual differentiation of the labor force was used to verify the accuracy of the census (p. 68); thus, more than merely reporting the sexual division of labor, the census was affected by it and reinforced it. Conk argues that because local conditions shape coding decisions (e.g., it may have been done differently, or not at all, in another time or place), the diverse practices that result need to be made apparent to subsequent users of the data.

Expectations also lie at the heart of research evaluation, especially when researchers decide whether to reference particular works and whether to make their own research public. Ferber (1986) found that researchers incorporate the controversial nature of an article—how it has been received by the scholarly community—into their decision about whether to reference it. Researchers constantly take the position of a generalized other to evaluate their own work, asking themselves, "How will my work be received? Is it even publishable?" Research in the fields of psychology (Coursol & Wagner 1986), economics (DeLong & Lang 1992), and political science (Gerber et al. 2001) suggests that study results—specifically, whether hypotheses were supported—affect the likelihood that the results will be published. These studies determine how to measure the extent of the file drawer problem (the tendency for scholars not to submit research results that fail to support a hypothesis) and the bias that

can result when studies with null results are excluded from a body of research literature that is later synthesized or analyzed collectively, as in a meta-analysis. The significance of results themselves may, at first thought, seem to be a technical rather than a social influence on research practice. But what influences a researcher's decision to submit a paper, and reviewers' and editors' decisions to publish a paper, is ultimately concerned with how the (insignificant) results will be received and whether the work will be accepted by the intellectual community.

Temporal and Spatial Setting

Setting, or the confluence of time and place, has been shown to influence research practice. Sana & Weinreb (2008) find that researchers' position—specifically their closeness to the data collection effort—affects whether and how well they edit data inconsistencies. Sana & Weinreb use a clever experimental design: They begin with a complete set of real survey data from a questionnaire that all respondents are familiar with, selectively remove known pieces of information, and ask respondents to fill in the missing data on the basis of available information (i.e., nonmissing data). Consistent with accounts of the importance of situated knowledge—but surprising to those who see mechanized computer fixes as ideal—Sana & Weinreb find that insiders (interviewers and field supervisors) edited the data more correctly than did outsiders (project managers and data users with no experience collecting the data in the field). Historical and institutional setting has also been emphasized by sociologists who have reflected upon the development and popularity of research methods over time (Abbott 2001, Platt 1996, Raftery 2001, Turner & Turner 1990).

External Conditions

Conditions external to the discipline also shape practitioners' approaches. In addition to computer technology, sponsoring organizations—because they may be more attuned to what would (numbers) and would not (stories) be persuasive to potential audiences—have been particularly influential (Platt 1996, p. 134). Platt shows that, rather than leading the shift from case studies to a quantitative survey paradigm (which was already underway, due partly to depression relief and war-related efforts), funding agencies influenced the character of quantitative work, such as the scope of the study and whether primary data collection could be undertaken. Raftery (2001) notes and Turner & Turner (1990) explicate how funding and data availability shaped trends in research methods and practice in the later twentieth century. In his study of fieldwork in Algeria, Peneff (1985) demonstrates that local politics also shapes research methods and findings, largely by determining access to research sites, granting permission to conduct research, and influencing relationships with informants and participants.

Dissatisfaction with Dominant Methods

Although no study has been conducted on how researchers' assessments of standard methods affect their research approach, such reactions are clearly influential. In *Time Matters*, Abbott (2001) critiques the ways we conceptualize and empirically incorporate time, sequence, and nonrecursive elements in our research and reviews his proposed methods that are better suited for this task, such as narrative (Abbott 1992) and sequence analysis (Abbott 1995). Ragin (1987, 2000) critiques the dominant variable-oriented statistical practice and continues to develop alternatives better suited for small-*N* studies that prioritize cases in their entirety. Goldthorpe (2000) leaves no stone unturned in his treatise *On Sociology*, which offers a polemical and engaging assessment of methodological dogma and everyday practice. In *Making It Count*, Lieberson (1985) critically evaluates current sociological practice, including the dominant quasi-experimental approach and selection issues, and provides a compelling argument for limiting the number of control variables used in statistical modeling. More recently, Lieberson & Lynn (2002) encouraged

sociologists to reconsider the physical sciences paradigm after which sociology models itself, and to consider an alternative paradigm based on the biological sciences. In his review of the use of statistics in sociology in the second half of the twentieth century, Raftery (2001, p. 26) identifies trends based partly on unease with constraints of dominant methods. This unease was also instrumental in the development of social network analysis, which grew out of disdain for survey methods that studied individuals in isolation (Freeman 2004).

APPROACHES TO STUDYING PRACTICE

How have these social influences on research practice been identified and assessed? What methods have researchers used to understand the various social forces that shape research?

Because the criteria for evaluating scientific works are not easily articulated, and principles that guide scientific research exist largely in unwritten codes (National Academy of Science 1992, p. 36), many investigations of research practice have relied on primary data collection via experiments and interviews. Many experiments on social research practice have been embedded within surveys and interviews. To assess the extent of response effects, Tourangeau & Smith (1996) manipulated question wording and closed-ended response sets, and Smit and colleagues (1997) manipulated the suggestiveness of interviewers' language. To assess how closeness to the data collection setting affects data editing competence, Sana & Weinreb (2008) asked people with varying degrees of familiarity with the data to struggle with responses to survey items that were manipulated to be inconsistent. To assess how status effects evaluations of data editing practice, Leahey (2004) manipulated the status of a researcher depicted in a hypothetical survey vignette. Perhaps more than surveys, interviews have been used to understand research decisions and practices, including evaluation (Guetzkow et al. 2004) and oversight (Leahey 2008).

Some descriptions and guidelines of research are available in written form and thus available for content analysis. Extant material includes methods textbooks, professional and ethical codes, editorial policies, as well as journal articles, books, and references to such works. To understand and critique the standard depiction of social science research methods, Lynch & Bogen (1997) reflexively analyzed introductory sociology textbooks. Tsay et al. (2003) accessed letters of recommendation for a fellowship to see how perceptions of merit have changed over time. A few scholars have studied the content of publications, with a slight bias toward articles in prestigious journals. For example, Abbott & Barman (1997) studied *American Journal of Sociology* (*AJS*) articles over the course of 70 years to assess changes in format and rhetorical strategies, Leahey (2005) tracked patterns in statistical significance testing in *AJS* and *ASR* articles, Karides and colleagues (2001) add *Social Problems* to the mix, and more recently, Abend (2006) analyzed the content of qualitative articles in American and Mexican sociology journals to compare epistemologies. Moody (2004) and Hargens (2000) rely on published articles and references to such articles, respectively, in a wide range of subfields and fields, and Clemens et al. (1995) and Platt (1996) analyze books as well as journal articles. To understand conceptions of research ethics, Stark (2006) analyzes changes in ethical policies over time.

Although extant data sources (e.g., large secondary surveys) on the topic of research practice are rare, extant methods are plentiful and have not been fully exploited. Because "rationales used in publications cannot be taken as a sure guide to the processes by which original research decisions were made" (Platt 1996, p. 139), we might hope for analyses of methodological appendices, comments and replies, as well as reflection (e.g., Starbuck 2006) in the future. Network analyses have been used to study reference and collaboration networks and the structure of disciplines (Baldi 1998, Moody 2004) but not the use and diffusion of particular research practices. To understand the impact

of research practices on data quality, computer simulations might be useful. In a recent issue of *Science*, Bainbridge (2007) explicates the scientific research potential of virtual worlds—new electronic tools that permit new variants on traditional experimental and ethnographic methods. Because scientific practice is emergent and open-ended (Pickering 1992), the retrospective and time-sensitive work of Abbott, Peneff, Porter, Platt, and Smith might be supplemented by prospective studies that follow scholars as they go about their social research and confront situations for which standard methods either do not apply or fail to provide an easy solution. Gieryn (1996, 2000) might also encourage us to think harder about our relevant units of analysis—be they individual or collective agents or more structural forces such as disciplinary powers and settings.

UNDERSTUDIED PRACTICES

Some important and common research practices at various stages in the research process have been excluded from this review, and many others have yet to be subjected to social inquiry. I list these practices in **Table 2** and elaborate upon them below.

Practices in the early stage of research include the choice of research topic. Although there is some evidence that carving out one aspect of an advisor's research program is less common in the social sciences compared with the natural sciences and engineering, we know little about how researchers come upon topics or the social factors that prompt, discourage, or conceal a given topic; what we do know stems from the works of methodological greats (Abbott 2004, Becker 1998, Merton 1982, Zuckerman 1978) rather than ordinary researchers. Extending Platt's (1996) work to the more recent period would help us understand how methods are chosen in this era of plentiful options, when data structure alone no longer dictates method. Surprisingly, the decision to use an experimental design and the nature of such designs have not been subject to social and critical inquiry, perhaps because the laboratory is perceived to be influence-free, at least under ideal conditions (Hunsberger & Ennis 1982, Winer et al. 1988).

Several practices in the intermediate stage of research (after a topic has been chosen and a research strategy has been designed) have eluded sociological investigation to date. Although coding and data editing have received some attention, related practices, such as interpreting data and handling missing (rather than messy) data, are ripe for investigation. Disciplinary conflicts, embedded within comments and replies to published papers (among other venues), suggest that the interpretation of data and results is far from straightforward—there is likely variation (and socially influenced variation) in this research practice as well. And although multiple methods for handling missing data have been developed, whether and how researchers use these methods is unknown.

Later-stage research practices have been studied in the natural sciences and a few social scientific fields, but rarely sociology. How research articles and rhetorical strategies are developed has been studied in economics (McCloskey 1990, 1994); accounting practices have been studied in biochemistry (Gilbert & Mulkay 1980, 1982); and publication bias has been studied in political science (Gerber et al. 2001) and psychology (Coursol & Wagner 1986). In the social sciences, such topics have received much less attention; I point interested readers to Abbott & Barman's (1997) excellent investigation of the development of the modern research paper and to Hunter's (1990) edited volume, *The Rhetoric of Social Research*. Surprisingly, the practice of replication has not been studied in the social sciences, only in the natural sciences (Collins 1985, Mulkay & Gilbert 1986). We know little about the prevalence of replication in social science or how replications are received, especially if they fail to support the original analysis and/or locate errors in the original analysis. There has been no systematic study of corrections or comments in social science (National Academy of Science 1992), even though such practices are critical to knowledge flow.

Table 2 Research practices ripe for investigation, by stage of the research process

Stage of the research process		
Beginning	**Intermediate**	**End**
External control over research (Oakes 2002, Leahey 2008, Shea 2000, Stark 2006)	Probing (Schaeffer & Maynard 2002)	External control over results by sponsors, editors (Timmermans 1995)
Choice of topic (Merton 1982; Kuhn 1970; Abbott 2004; Becker 1998)	Statistical power (G. Howard, unpublished manuscript)	Constructing a research paper (McCloskey 1990, 1994; Abbott & Barman 1997)
Choice of method (Grant et al. 1987)	Nonresponse (Hoegeman 2007)	Cultural and historical differences in scientific style
Informed consent	Reasoning and interpreting data	Framing a paper; use of previous literature
	Handling missing data (Dalton 1997)	Finding (specialized and interdisciplinary) audiences
	Falsifying data (Resnick 1996, Roth & Bowen 2001)	Accounting practices (Gilbert & Mulkay 1980)
	Specification searches (Leamer 1977)	Ways of referencing previous literature
	Technology and "technicways" (Odum 1937)	Handling contradictory results (Lieberson 1992)
	Effect sizes	Reception of corrections and comments

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Much remains to be done in the sociology of social research practice. Considerably more material needs to be generated if we are to understand better "the state of the art with regard to methodological choice in behavioral and social science. The principal reason we need to do so is that, to date, there is little evidence to suggest that the lessons to be learned from these previous accounts have been assimilated into the research enterprise" (Kulka 1981, p. 157). In this review, I delineated the various research practices that have been studied and the diverse methods that have been used to study them. But gaps remain: Important and common practices have been neglected, and methods amenable to the study of practice have not been capitalized upon. One way future scholars can add to the existing body of knowledge on social research practice is to study a tried and true practice (e.g., interviewing) with a new method (e.g., network analysis), or by using a traditional method (e.g., experiment) to explore an understudied practice (e.g., handling missing data). And although several theoretical perspectives (symbolic interaction, sociology of scientific knowledge, organizational theory, etc.) have influenced this work, thoughtful readers will undoubtedly devise unique ways of applying and testing ideas from other theoretical traditions. To promote further research in this newly emerging subfield, I end this review with a list of possible themes and corresponding research questions that I have developed and culled from the foregoing analysis.

- We know that scholarly consensus levels affect status attainment (Hargens & Hagstrom 1982), but how (if at all) do they affect research practice? Is it still the case that low-consensus fields such as sociology use particularistic criteria more often, as Pfeffer and colleagues (1977) found among editorial boards?
- How does variation in research practice influence the reliability of results? Do different practices matter? Although a few

survey researchers have concerned themselves with the data quality implications of research protocols, Viterna & Maynard (2002, p. 391) maintain that "research is needed to determine whether or not the same instrument at centers with disparate orientations to interviewer standardization and autonomy generate findings that are in substantial agreement." As most of the research reviewed here suggests, research practice is often taken as an outcome to be explained by social factors, but assessing the significance and importance of research practice—for data quality, professional autonomy, and the like—is just as critical (see the middle column of **Table 1** for select examples).

- How is technology shaping research practice? All sorts of technological advances are potentially relevant to social research, including desktop computers, programs such as *Google Documents* that make long-distance collaboration easier, open-source software (e.g., "R") and shareware, widely available statistical packages, free web-based survey software, and the like. Are such tools creating new habits [e.g., Odum's (1937) underutilized concept of "technicways"] and changing the ways we collect and manage data, test theories, and report results? Are they permitting the development of new methods, as predicted by Bainbridge (2007)? Troyer's (2007) recent examination of technology's effect on experimental design and variable measurement is a step in the right direction.
- Will the influence of external research funding on the character of social research (Camic 1995, Geiger 1988, Platt 1996, Rong et al. 1989) lessen as research comes to be dominated by free and inexpensive technology (e.g., open-source software such as "R," shareware, free web-survey software, etc.)?
- Do routine, formal, and easily implemented routines promote the use of particular techniques? Will SAS's and STATA's commands for multiple imputation promote this technique over listwise deletion and other strategies for handling missing data? Do such user-friendly routines change the nature of the method? For example, will the transference of Ragin's (1987, 2000) techniques into STATA (K. Longest & S. Vaisey, unpublished manuscript) change the technique in important but not always recognizable ways?
- In what ways are the rise and increasing jurisdiction of overseeing agencies (e.g., IRBs, funding agencies such as NIH, the Office of Research Integrity, etc.) affecting research practice? Are they making research practice more standardized, more transparent, or more ethical? Are they limiting professional autonomy in potentially deleterious ways?
- Under what conditions do certain practices stick and others fail to take off? Why is listwise deletion still an accepted strategy for dealing with missing data even when better alternatives, such as multiple imputation and full-information maximum likelihood, are available? Why has Bayesian statistics evolved in other disciplines, such as economics, but remains in the statistical backwaters in sociology, despite prominent advocates such as Adrian Raftery and Bruce Western?
- How prevalent is replication in the social sciences? Is it as rare (and as difficult) in the social sciences as it is in the natural sciences? Who engages in replication, for what reasons, and what does it accomplish?
- What effect will policy changes have on research practice? For example, how might proposals for easier replicability (Freese 2008) influence the nature and prevalence of replication? How will it

bear on the conduct, presentation, and evaluation of research?

- In experiments, how do techniques of subject recruitment and related experimental methods influence research results? Experimentalists' practice of recruiting volunteers and undergraduate students has been criticized, but the practice persists. An intriguing methodological study might replicate an experiment in multiple settings, with diverse subject pools and recruitment strategies, and assess variation across subpopulations. A comparison of field and lab experiments on the same topic should also yield helpful information about the impact of subject recruitment (Green & Gerber 2003).
- How do social networks shape research practice? Do specialty areas, PhD programs, postdoc opportunities, advisor-advisee relationships, and hiring networks (Burris 2004) serve as local or virtual communities within which tastes and practices are encultured? Are such ties critical to the development and spread of particular approaches, such as the predilection for fixed effects models in overtime, cross-national research, and the use of multilevel models in education and life course research?
- Why is compensating subjects for their time and effort (the practice of gifting) common in some disciplines, such as psychology, but rare in others, such as sociology?
- What about larger social organizations, such as nations? How do research practices vary across countries? Are there cultural differences in approaches to subject recruitment, informed consent, and gifting? More cross-cultural comparison in research practice should help inform the development and revision of IRB regulations and make international research easier.
- Do corrections and critiques of the research literature hold, even in low-consensus fields such as sociology? Or does the scholarly community continue to cite arguably flawed research and neglect unsupportive reanalyses? Under what conditions does the author of the original research concede an error or misinterpretation? Systematically assessing the prevalence of comments and describing their nature (e.g., with what practice do they take issue?) and their authors (e.g., the relative standing of scholars involved in the exchange) would add to our understanding of the social nature of the social scientific enterprise.
- In what ways are quantitative and qualitative research practices similar, overlapping, or divergent?
- How does the recent, renewed push toward interdisciplinarity shape research practices, especially one form of simplification: ignoring the interconnections among things (Star 1983)?
- How do different researchers, with different training and background experiences, interpret the same data differently? How do researchers decide when results do, or do not, or partly, support their hypothesis? Despite Lieberson's (1992) call for a subfield of social epistemology, only a few scholars have investigated variation in the way scholars approach theory and evidence (Abend 2006).
- Are there social (not simply experimenter) influences even on the most controlled form of social inquiry: experimental designs? If so, what are they and how do they operate?

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The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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Errata

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