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CHAPTER 20

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Emergent Issues in Linking Qualitative and Quantitative Evidence

Sarah Irwin

In this chapter I consider the value of using different kinds of evidence, from macro to micro, in exploring social processes. Quantitative and qualitative data provide particular lenses on these different “levels.” However, we need to acknowledge that these levels are often not distinct research problems but rather different *dimensions* of unitary problems. For example, to understand an individual’s values and subjective beliefs, we need knowledge of him or her as a person, knowledge of his or her proximate circumstances and experiences, and knowledge of the wider social structural contexts in which he or she is positioned. An inquiry into well-being may reveal a poor person to be more satisfied with his or her situation than a wealthy person. It is only by understanding the social distribution of wealth, the social organization of aspiration and constraint, and people’s diverse circumstances that we can make sense of their per-

ceptions and of the differences between them. Researching macro and micro is not just about “linking data”; it is an issue of how we conceptualize the phenomena we are investigating.

In this chapter I explore some examples in which using different sources of evidence can enhance our understanding and explanation of social processes. I argue that:

- Most of our research problems are complex and multifaceted. Different methods and sources of evidence will reveal specific slices through the phenomena and processes under study, and we need to understand better precisely how the evidence reveals a partial and particular picture. For example, in-depth interviews and survey responses may provide different lenses on people’s perceptions of some particular event or state of affairs, and so different kinds of account are generated by the differ-

ent media of data collection. Another illustrative example here is the way people provide accounts, in open-ended interviews, of their decisions about the best type of care for their children in terms of a moral choice, yet it is only by understanding (say, through survey evidence) that people in similar circumstances make the same kinds of “moral” choices that we can see that morality provides us with a partial account of the nature of their decision making.

- We need to keep under reflexive and critical scrutiny the categories we use to organize our thinking and order our data. This is consistent with seeking more expansive and systematically adequate explanations of the processes under study. For example, gender, age, and ethnicity are standard variables used to denote difference, yet these categories are not always adequately theorized in respect of the processes or patterns under investigation. They may be effective categories for revealing structures of inequality, for example, but qualitative research helps reveal that the salience of these categories of difference may vary across contexts, in respect of material inequalities, subjective orientations, and so on.

- Developing adequate conceptualizations of the phenomena and processes under investigation must remain at the heart of social analysis. We use theory-laden categories through which we interpret empirical evidence, itself shaped by our tools of data collection. Nevertheless, empirical data can supply us with tools for reinterrogating, expanding, or changing our conceptualization. In the examples in this chapter I consider how drawing together data from different sources and “levels” of the social can contribute to enhancing social explanation.

The chapter is organized as follows. In the next section I briefly explore some issues that emerge from recent debates on the value of mixing methods. I argue that we need to understand how methods and evidence entail concepts about the nature of

what we are researching. Empirical evidence carries with it the assumptions that went into its making, but we need also attend to precisely how it bears on the research problem at hand. It may give a partial picture in that it shows only one “part” of the complex phenomenon under study. Importantly, we also need to be aware of the risk that a partial picture may be a distorting one. It may mislead us as to the salient processes shaping the phenomena we are researching. Additionally, it is inappropriate to treat macro patterns and knowledge of diversity as “background” context and qualitative evidence on meaning, interaction, value, and so on as holding a more direct line to “process.” I introduce some issues and examples in considering how both macro- and micro-level lenses are important in building not just a broader picture but a more adequate understanding of social processes. The third section continues the theme of social explanation with reference to different models of adequacy in connecting theory and data. I look at the historical example of explanatory models used to understand the incidence of cholera in the 19th century. Critics have seen in the different models lessons about adequacy and progress in social science research. Some argue that now, still, standard ways of representing and modeling quantitative data are too abstracted from social phenomena and risk distorting the processes in which we are interested. We see how the form of data and modes of analysis shape our understandings in particular ways. Nevertheless, there is scope for empirical data analysis not merely to confirm prior assumptions but to contribute to theoretical expansion and transformation. The fourth section explores and develops some of the themes through a consideration of empirical data. The examples all share a concern with the link between people’s attitudes and perceptions on the one hand and the social and economic structures in which they are embedded on the other. In recent research and theory there is a tendency to treat individual perceptions and values as a “layer” of subject-

tive and normative understanding that is distinct from aggregate structures of distribution, for example. This has been a source of arguments that ideology prevents people from seeing the workings of an oppressive social system and of linked arguments that in late modern society, values and choices are more freed from social structural processes than they were in the past. However, people clearly hold diverse positions within such structures, and it is to these contexts and positions that we need to relate their subjective orientations. We can understand the links between micro and macro, and between subjective and objective, only if we have a sufficient understanding of social structural diversity. We need to move across levels of evidence in seeking to adequately understand subjective orientations. The examples I develop all reveal a connectedness of subjective orientations and social structure. Additionally, they show that bringing together evidence, which is a theoretical issue more than a technical one, can help us tackle puzzles of explanation and transform understanding.

Issues in Linking Methods

There has been a recent surge of interest in mixed methods research and its potential. The idea of mixing methods is not new. Many writers have long advocated using mixed methods, and many have done so in their research practices. But there has been a renewed interest among social scientists and funding agencies, in line with a perception that mixing methods provides a way forward and perhaps a renewal of our resources for tackling social complexity and contemporary social problems. Mixing methods is sometimes defined in different ways, but in general it can be taken to refer to bringing together qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

Many different rationales and schema have been devised for elucidating the differ-

ent ways in which quantitative and qualitative strategies can be brought together. There are many ways to combine data and many examples of good practice in this area. Brannen (2005), Bryman (2001, 2005), Hammond (2005), Mason (2006), Moran-Ellis and colleagues (2006), Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003), and many others have explored and classified ways in which multimethod and mixed methods research proceeds. For example, there are sequential models, in which one strategy follows from the other in the design of the research. A preliminary qualitative (part of a) study might sensibly precede a quantitative (part of) one to generate insider knowledge and insights that would feed into the quantitative design. Alternatively, quantitative research might generate (among other things) a sampling frame from which key informant participants might be identified for a qualitative study. Another common reason for using mixed methods is that, in tackling complex issues with different component parts, different methods may be deemed most appropriate to different parts of a study. The pattern of enhancement, in which data from different methods are seen to be supplementary and adding value, or insight, was one of the most common uses of mixed methods that Bryman found in his content analysis of U.K. social science articles published between 1994 and 2003 (Bryman, 2005). Another common claim for mixed quantitative and qualitative research is that qualitative methods allow us to interpret the relationship between variables. Thus we might have evidence of associations at a macro level and infer a causal relationship, but we need qualitative research to develop and test out our understandings of individual action and interaction (cf. Goldthorpe, 2000). Another common usage of mixed methods is triangulation, in which data from different sources are used to enhance understanding or to explore validity by bringing different evidence to bear on the same problem (Bryman, 2001; Kelle, 2001). It may be, too, that different data sources allow for resolution of

some puzzle and in this way help advance explanation (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003). In Bryman's content analysis, this was shown to be a relatively unusual rationale or outcome of research (Bryman, 2005).

I want to say more about the logic of bringing together different methods and/or data sources and how they may help access social process. Certainly it is widely recognized that evidence is theory laden, not theory neutral. Although there has long been debate about how particular methods shape what we see (e.g., Becker & Geer, 1957; Trow, 1957), this issue remains important. Linking different methods helps to crystallize some of the issues since we are more forced to confront the specificity of particular datasets.

One example of the specificity of data as a lens on social process comes from Deacon and his colleagues' (1998, as cited in Bryman, 2000) study of researchers' interactions with, and experience of, the mass media in Britain. Here, diverse kinds of evidence reveal a seemingly single object of analysis to be multifaceted. In their research, qualitative and quantitative data generated an apparent discrepancy, with the former suggesting a relationship of conflict between researchers and journalists that was absent from the quantitative evidence. What should we make of this discrepancy? It is here that arguments typically start up about how effectively different methods tap into the most important issues. But what is more interesting and productive is to consider how the different kinds of evidence reveal different facets of social experience. Both may be valid so long as we understand the nature of the method, the context in which the data are created, and the precise way such data accesses the issues under investigation. Deacon (1998, as cited in Bryman, 2001) showed that in their survey responses academics gave an "average" rating of their dealings with journalists, yet in semistructured interviews they were oriented to memorable encounters. We might suggest that atypical stories get played up in narrative accounts. They make a good story. They may

also have an impact on people's lived experience far greater than the "average" rating reveals. Here we can see how different methods access (or "reconstruct") different facets of the same experience.

Research into values provides a second example of how data from a particular micro or macro perspective provide a specific and potentially distorting lens on our research questions. Mason (2002) argues, with reference to qualitative methods, that we should see "asking, listening, and interpretation" as theoretical projects: "how we ask and listen are theoretical enactments of our assumptions around where the phenomenon we are interested in are located, and how the interviewee and interview can illuminate the issues" (Mason, 2002, pp. 233–234).

In her substantive interest in researching values and morality in kinship relationships, Mason is concerned that people have sought an understanding of values and morals through abstract interview questions, arguing that these "direct attention to wrong or 'nonexistent' locations" and, further, that "they miss the point about morality in that they assume it is a thing rather than a process or practice" (Mason, 2002, pp. 233–234). Following a more in-depth line of inquiry to tackle this, we might invite people to provide "real-life" stories, yet we need to be aware that people may describe their decisions and behaviors in moral terms. For example, in deciding on the best type of care for their preschool child, or in making decisions about whether to work or care full time for preschool-age children, interviewees stress moral commitments and evaluative judgments (Duncan & Edwards, 1999). However, a wide picture reveals such moral accounts to be patterned in relation to social and economic constraints and opportunities, revealing "moral" judgements to be socially shaped (Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Duncan & Irwin, 2004). This is not to say that people are making up a moral account. They may choose to emphasize certain facets of their experience and choices, facets that may be important to them in their ac-

counts to themselves, as well as to other people. Yet these may be partial accounts. In consequence, such accounts might lead us to overestimate moral reflexivity as a driver of behavior. It is not that accounts of belief, values, and choices are without value; far from it. However, we do need to have a clear understanding of how such data relate (or fail to relate) to our research question.

In this example we may see that a breadth of evidence that looks at responses across diverse contexts (whether through qualitative or survey means) allows us to see more clearly a patterning to the responses (Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Irwin, 2004). This patterning suggests that morality cannot be seen as an internal conversation in which individuals come to personal judgments about “doing the right thing,” nor can it be understood only as an outcome of proximate context and interaction. The structured nature of such judgments reveals diverse contexts that shape moral and evaluative judgments (e.g., which is the best type of care for my preschool child?). “Up close” (in-depth) evidence reveals the importance to people of the moral content of their choices; “wide angle” (e.g., survey) evidence reveals the structured nature of their “choices.” Evidence from only one of these sources provides only a part of a bigger picture, but it may also lead us to misapprehend the nature of “choice” as a singularly moral or social phenomenon. Evidence from both sources helps reveal the moral and social to be intertwined.

Methods, in part, create what we see. This must not lead us to relativism, in which we accept the validity of multiple, and possibly conflicting, accounts of the social world. Rather, it requires that we know more precisely how we are tapping into the processes in which we are interested and how our data offer a particular construction of and lens on such processes. We need conceive of data (from different sources and different methods) as offering specific kinds of evidence, as particular rather than all-revealing slices through our research problems.

The examples raise the question of how we may best access social process and how different data sources facilitate this. It is often said that quantitative research allows us access to pattern and qualitative method allows us access to process. Bryman (2005) supplemented his content analysis with semistructured interviews with 20 social scientists who have used mixed methods in their research. We can note that his interviewees referred to qualitative evidence accessing meaning and quantitative research supplying breadth (Bryman, 2005), and this is a common enough observation. At one level this is clear-cut and not problematic. However, just as it is inappropriate to accept too clear-cut a distinction between quantitative and qualitative strategies (e.g., Hammersley, 1992), so, too, we need to be cautious about dichotomizing pattern and process. They overlap and can usefully be seen as mutually made. Pattern and process are not distinct domains of social phenomena but, rather, different kinds of accounts of social phenomena.

Data on micro-level processes are often deemed to help illuminate pattern. Clearly, knowledge of micro-level beliefs, behaviors, interactions, and so on can help illuminate processes that may be hinted at by, but opaque to, quantitative research. However, social patterns are less often considered to illuminate process at a micro level. Certainly, a core stock in trade of qualitative analysis, which often proceeds from patterns found “within the data,” is building understanding of patterns based on comparing cases. However, “external” quantitative data are often deemed background or context for micro-level research and not connected in a direct way. This is unfortunate. It may be essential to adequate knowledge of the positioning of individuals being researched and of the content of their beliefs. In the aforementioned example of values in respect to child care, people’s values concerning “good mothering” (as a full-time care commitment or a combination of paid work and care) connect closely with their circumstances in respect to

employment-based opportunities and constraints (Irwin, 2005). The constraints under which people act and perceive their experience may not be articulated by them (or not always reflected on). Nevertheless, we do not properly understand the nature of people's values and subjective orientations if we do not understand the contexts in which they hold meaning.

In short, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research does not have some privileged direct line to process. As Kelle puts it, "structural nearsightedness clearly limits the explanatory power of research results derived exclusively from the qualitative investigation of actors' perspectives" (2001, p. 30). Often we cannot make proper explanatory sense of individual-level data if we do not have a handle on more aggregate structures. We may fail to understand crucial meanings, motivations, and understandings held by individuals, and accessible through qualitative research, if we are unable to locate them in the broader contexts and structures in which they are embedded and take on shape. Furthermore, social diversity means that we get not only a partial picture from people but also a view from a specific location within that diversity. The structured nature of social arrangements not only provides "context" for micro-level beliefs, behaviors, expectations, and so on but also shapes their content in important ways.

Qualitative research is often charged with a need to better locate the specific as part of the general and to locate contexts of action and belief as part of a wider social structure. Quantitative research is often charged with a need to better access such contexts. Recently, there is a growing interest in more sufficiently connecting micro and macro levels of evidence and analysis. However, clearly this is not just about supplying evidence pertaining to an "interconnecting" meso layer of context, although this would often help. It is a conceptual issue. How we best bring together methods and data is not at heart a methodological question but one

that must be driven by tackling substantive research questions and guided by criteria of adequacy in how we connect theory and data. In this section I have argued that particular data sources offer a specific lens on multifaceted problems, and by itself this *may* be misleading. Additionally, I have argued that qualitative data may not necessarily access process, because we need an adequate understanding of structure and of diversity to adequately locate and interpret qualitative evidence. However, this is not simply a case of connecting qualitative to quantitative data sources. In the next section, I explore some issues in representing the "general picture" through quantitative data analysis.

Issues in Researching Social Causality

In addressing issues in linking theory and data, different writers have drawn on the fascinating historical example of the search for understanding the spread of cholera in the 19th century (Freedman, 1991; Turner, 1997). The example has been used to draw some lessons in the use of different kinds of evidence and modes of analysis for theoretical development. I summarize it again in order to consider some of the lessons drawn by previous writers and to add some observations about the nature of evidence we can bring to our research questions.

Through his work in mid-19th century England, John Snow developed an understanding of cholera as caused by a waterborne organism transmitted through human waste. It was only in 1884 that the bacterium was isolated and observable through newly powerful microscopes. Before that the nature of cholera and its incidence had to be deduced from an understanding of extant patterns. Snow's explanation went against the grain of accepted wisdom and understanding that the disease was caused by miasma, or poisonous particles carried in the air (Freedman, 1991; Turner, 1997). Scientific work that was in keeping with the contemporary understand-

ing was being developed by William Farr, the superintendent of the Statistical Department of the Registrar General's Office. Turner describes the rival interpretations of Snow and Farr and how their different methods, assumptions, and questions shaped their very different understandings of the nature of cholera (Turner, 1997).

Farr, in line with miasma theory, had identified a pattern, within a major epidemic, of a strong inverse relation between the altitude of dwellings and the incidence of cholera. He took this as strong evidence in support of the prevailing theory. Turner emphasizes the limits to causal reasoning based on attempts to model cholera and its correlates without getting close enough to understanding its patterning "on the ground." In contrast, Snow developed his radically new theory through an approach that took him much closer to the transmission of cholera by an intensive, empirically based inquiry (hence the "shoe leather" in Freedman's [1991] title). Snow sought a situated understanding. He collected evidence surrounding the incidence and outbreaks of cholera, exploring the details of people's living arrangements and circumstances. He built evidence about the course of different outbreaks and found a strong clustering around water sources that evidence showed to be contaminated (Freedman, 1991). Through a series of naturally occurring experiments, Snow developed, elaborated, and tested out his theory. Although Farr came to accept the plausibility of Snow's conjectures, Turner argues that he simply added these into his statistical model and concluded that the key causal mechanism of transmission (contaminated water) simply held some additional effect (Turner, 1997).

In particular, Turner argues that the assumptions embedded in Farr's statistical models and the nature of the process of statistical modeling effectively blinded him to countervailing evidence that should have upended his theory. Additionally, Farr's method left him without effective means to falsify the theory. In short, the efficacy of sta-

tistical models is bounded by the correctness of assumptions that shape the model. Turner sees echoes in today's modeling and a tendency still to wrongly equate correlation and causality. He is concerned that we are too quick to assume causality in the absence of an understanding of underlying mechanisms or processes that reveal the internal workings of the causal process in which we are interested.

Turner argues that today, as in the 19th century, causal modelers risk being too distant from their data and that, although we have various tools for modeling associations, there remains the possibility that we are not correctly representing the mechanisms in which we are interested. Therefore "social scientists are a bit like Farr before his complete conversion to Snow's account of cholera" (Turner, 1997, p. 43). Causal models are no better than the assumptions on which they are founded. Sound knowledge is built, rather, on intensive empirical work, which holds qualitative insights and is available to testing and to falsification. Freedman, too, sees in Snow's work a more scientific approach to advancing explanation. He particularly stresses the value of Snow's development of questions and theory that could be tested against the empirical evidence and in a wide variety of settings and sees this as the model to emulate (Freedman, 1991). For Freedman:

regression models are not a particularly good way of doing empirical work in the social sciences today, because the techniques depend on knowledge that we do not have. Investigators who use the technique are not paying adequate attention to the connection—if any—between the models and the phenomena they are studying. (1991, p. 304)

Turner and Freedman both favor methods and modes of data collection and analysis that lie much closer to "internal" processes than the relative abstraction of researching aggregate patterns and associations and causal modeling.

Other writers have made similar arguments. Advocates of a realist program of research see some conventional approaches to data and explanation as entailing a “black box” approach to causal analysis. For example, experimental method follows an input-output model, measuring differences before and after the introduction of some manipulation but often failing to engage adequately with the actual processes engendering change (e.g., Pawson & Tilley, 1997). In the experimental method cause is seen as external to that being measured, a force acting on an object (Goldthorpe, 2000; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Similarly conventional approaches to statistical modeling, and variable-led analysis more widely, have been challenged for holding an inadequate representation of “internal mechanisms” and processes (Byrne, 2002; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). In their social realist perspectives, explanation needs to access internal processes, the “chemistry” of process, rather than simply deducing it from “external” evidence. Crucially, “generative theory sees causation as acting internally as well as externally” (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 34). Nevertheless, adequately representing processes remains a challenge for social explanation.

For example, reflecting back on Turner’s critique of Farr, we need to recognize that Farr believed that he had an appropriate and accurate representation of causal process. He thought he was approximating the “internal process.” He was working with the prevailing theoretical understanding, and the evidence available to him appeared to confirm this theory (Turner, 1997). As Blalock (1991) says, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can distinguish so straightforwardly “between the tactics of the very few successful detectives and those of the presumably much greater number of failing detectives” (Blalock, 1991, p. 329). How can we know when a particular understanding is the best bet? Snow benefited from “natural experiments” in which he could develop and test out his developing theoretical propositions. An important principle, when we do

not benefit from “natural experiments,” is to create our own and make our assumptions available to testing (e.g., Blalock, 1991; Lieberson, 1992; Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Turner (1997) and Freedman (1991) advocate strategies that seek to “get close” to “internal processes,” with movement between proximate circumstances and broader patterns, and see this as important to developing theoretical inferences about causality. This movement across “levels” of evidence, between close up and wide angle, improves our understanding of process through deriving detailed empirical evidence, exploring general patterns, generating propositions, and testing them out across different contexts. It calls for working with all the available data to develop a more adequate theory. Blalock points out that the cholera example may be misleading as a metaphor for social science given that in the latter we are usually dealing with multiple causality and forms of contingency not evident in the cholera example (Blalock, 1991). Nevertheless, the case for moving between levels and subjecting theoretical propositions to test is every bit as key to enhancing social science understanding.

The cholera example, as others, shows how prior assumptions and expectations govern the ways in which we approach and analyze data. However, this is not to say that we are doomed to reproduce our prior conceptual frameworks. Empirical data can certainly challenge and even lead to a renewal of theory. Before exploring this in relation to some concrete examples of research, later in the chapter, I consider some recent criticisms of quantitative modeling. Again, we see concerns with the level of abstraction from the source data entailed in causal modeling, and an argument has been made that we need to build macro-level datasets, evidence, and analyses that can more closely represent social experiences, interactions, and patterns. Again, this is an argument about more adequately theorizing social process through interrogating the links between micro- and macro-level evidence.

The critics of variable-centered, or variable-led, quantitative modeling do not (generally) deny that the approach is necessary and valuable to representing patterns and regularities in social life (see Kemp & Holmwood, 2003, for a critique of those who do). After all, the knowledge of extant regularities is fundamental to exploring social life and its stable reproduction over time. However, in advocating a realist approach, various writers have been critical of variable-led analysis in which variables, at least at times, are seen to represent external forces acting *on* people or *on* social systems. Variable analysis in causal modeling necessarily looks at average effects (Byrne, 2005) and risks failing to get at where the social action is. For Lieberson and Lynn (2002), causal modeling is part of an inappropriate (classical-physics-derived) model of good science in the linking of evidence and theory. They argue that this model needs a radical reworking and that other models of scientific endeavor (such as the development of knowledge in evolutionary biology) provide better metaphors and guides for social science research (Lieberson & Lynn, 2002). Thus critics say that there is a tendency for variable-led analysis to insufficiently access context and to risk reifying variables as real forces. Byrne calls for death to the variable, a humorous yet serious challenge to those who place too much store by variable-led analysis in resolving conceptual problems. He insists that there is a risk that such analyses mislead as to generative mechanisms, in part through failing to engage with context and contingency. Byrne (2002) argues that:

Variables describing complex systems are descriptions of properties of the system as a whole. We can consider them as the dimensions of a multi-dimensional state space with the actual character of the system at any point in time being represented by the set of values on measured variables considered as coordinates in that state space. However, the coordinates are more of an address than a description of causes: they tell us where—not why. (p. 7)

He desires an approach that is case based rather than variable based, in which it is possible to aggregate up from knowledge of individuals in contexts and that additionally recognizes that systems are more than the sum of their parts and have emergent properties; that is, they produce outcomes that could not be predicted on the basis of knowledge of the parts. He argues that there is an important potential site for convergence between qualitative research and method and quantitative method, should it take the route he advocates, seeing “[the] key link between the two [as] the focus on the case rather than some abstraction from the case reified and regarded as a variable” (Byrne, 2002, p. 160).

Byrne may be overstating the extent to which social scientists suppose that variable analysis somehow does the theoretical work for them. Many would see variables as providing us with probabilistic descriptions of social diversity. Social science researchers rarely insist that some cause *determines* some outcome. One can think of many examples in which researchers treat variable evidence in terms of “variate traces,” which Byrne recommends: Variables provide a form of evidence, not a definitive account. Yet in practice reliance on variables does push toward a particular definition of the problem at hand. A variable-centered analysis offers a *particular* reconstruction and representation of the processes in which we are interested.

It is useful to reflect further on Byrne’s concern that we reify variables. The methodological concern articulated by Byrne holds echoes within recent subject-based debates in sociologies of difference. Here some writers have argued that there is a risk that social differences are reified in research, as their salience is often assumed, where it needs to be explained or contextualized (e.g., Anthias, 1998, 2001; Epstein, 1988; Young, 1990, 1997). Some writers, including myself, have argued that categories of difference, such as ethnicity, gender, and class, are sometimes inappropriately treated as causes, rather than outcomes, of wider social

processes (Anthias, 1998, 2001; Bottero & Irwin, 2003; Irwin, 2005). However, it may be crucial to research such divisions and not treat them as starting points for analysis. At a minimum we need to know when they count and why. What processes shape differences and give them salience (e.g., Bottero, 2004; Brubaker, 2002; Irwin, 2005; Siltanen, 1994)? In short, this requires an understanding of context and contingency and the shaping of diverse relevancies. There are parallels here with Byrne's advocacy of "mapping coordinates" of diversity and of taking a more taxonomic approach to ordering quantitative data through which we can remain more true to social context. For example, later in the chapter I show how gendered differences are being reshaped and how it is more useful to locate gender as an outcome of social relations (which are undergoing change) than to treat it as a static category or given social division.

In this section I have argued that we need to access underlying processes that shape the phenomena in which we are interested, a task that requires knowledge of contexts. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge that the way we categorize evidence entails theoretical assumptions. Neither qualitative nor quantitative research provides a privileged "direct line" to underlying processes. Qualitative evidence may speak more directly to process but will only do so where we can locate its specificity. Standard forms of quantitative data modeling and analysis have been challenged for being at too far a remove from specificity, for example, removed from perceptions, expectations, beliefs, behaviors, and modes of interaction as these relate to diverse contexts. Forms of evidence all carry theoretical assumptions and provide a particular, and theory-imbued, lens on our research questions. To improve our bearings on the processes in which we are interested, then, the use of different sources of evidence can help us. How we connect this evidence is a theoretical issue, and we need to reflect on how evidence relates to the social processes and phenomena in which we

are interested. In the next section I focus on some empirical examples, drawing on evidence from different "levels" of the social in seeking to tackle problems of explanation and to enhance our understanding of social processes.

Subjectivity and Social Structure: Linking Data in Researching Social Diversity and Social Change

In all the examples in this section, I explore research areas in which some writers have identified what they see as a discrepancy or misalignment between people's social position on the one hand and their perceptions and attitudes on the other. Some writers argue that in the current era we have seen a loosening of the relationship between subjective orientations and social structural processes. I argue that such conclusions are misplaced. Rather than accounting for discrepancies by reference to categories external to the empirical data (such as ideologies), reinterrogating the data and exploring links between macro and micro evidence contributes to a renewed understanding of the mutuality of subjective orientations and social structural processes.

Youth and the Life Course: Exploring Attitudes and Social Diversity

First I take two examples from studies of youth and early adulthood. One is from qualitative and the other from quantitative research. Both show interesting insights into the link between position and disposition. We can draw out some general themes.

Various youth researchers have engaged in depth with the question of how values and choices on the one hand relate to structural processes on the other. One of the issues here has been addressing the gap between macro-level evidence that reveals clearly structured patterns of inequality and its reproduction and micro-level evidence of peo-

ple's perceptions of choice and ownership of their destinies. In qualitatively based interviews, people will be likely to stress choice and agency in the stories they tell about themselves, in contrast to the quantitative evidence that reveals significant class-related inequalities in opportunity and constraint (e.g., Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). How do we understand the seeming discrepancy between the types of evidence? Some writers have posited ideological forces that obfuscate reality and encourage compliance with unequal and unjust social arrangements (for an extended discussion, see Irwin, 2005). However, it is more productive to consider how people's positions within the social structure will tend to engender and normalize particular views. Furthermore, as Nilsen and Brannen (2002) say, people are not routinely oriented to, nor typically particularly aware of, the external and structured forces that shape their lives so, "When structural forces and personal resources . . . support one another there is a tendency for the structural resources to take on an 'invisible' quality" (Nilsen & Brannen, 2002, p. 42.)

An example of the link between position and perception is revealed in a recent qualitative research project by Gillies and her colleagues (Gillies, Holland, & Ribbens McCarthy, 2003). Here a generational dimension is in evidence as young adults and their parents describe their perceptions of the formers' transitions to independence. Gillies and her colleagues stress the "embedded" nature of young adults' accounts, particularly the relational and interconnected nature of young people's understandings. The researchers argue that for young people describing their experiences, growing up was a process of taking control of their behavior and accepting responsibility for their decisions. Young people saw themselves as being at the center of their transition, as agents or authors of their progression to adult status. In contrast, interestingly, their parents emphasized their children's physical changes and the continuities they saw in their children's personalities

as they progressed from childhood to adulthood. Young adults highlighted the ways in which they had changed since their childhoods, whereas parents reflected on consistencies.

We can see these differences as unsurprising outcomes of the interviews, but it is pertinent to remind ourselves that young people may emphasize agency and the "cult of the self" more than any other life-course group. Gillies and her colleagues stress that the individualism expressed by the youngsters "was clearly contained within a wider social context, characterised by interdependent family relationships" (Gillies et al., 2003, p. 47).

I would suggest that we can also usefully draw out something that remains implicit within their account—young adults and their parents are positioned differently and might be seen as offering different "vantage points" on the question of transition to independence. The young adults naturally enough experience themselves as being agents in a context in which boundaries are widening and the scope for their action expands as they seize greater autonomy and responsibilities. Parents may have a more "sociological" understanding of this transition, having some social distance from it (and possibly engaging in a fair degree of reflexive analysis about their children's position and how, as parents, to best relate to it). The vantage points of youth and parent are very different. Superficially they appear contradictory, but we can better see them as consistent—an example of how diverse values and perceptions are closely aligned with people's diverse social locations. We see more clearly the links between subjective orientations and objective structures if we delineate the diverse contexts that shape people's experiences and perceptions.

My second example draws on small-scale survey research that also points to a connectedness of social position and subjective dispositions. Within a survey exploring various aspects of work and family life of 92 young people, ages 16–34, all respondents were in-

vited to rank claims to employment among people in different household and life-course circumstances (see Irwin, 1995, for details). They were asked to imagine that six people apply for a job and to assume that they are all equally qualified for the job. They were then asked “Who would you most like to see get the job? Who would you next most like to see get the job?” and so on. The six people in the vignette were described as: a young woman living at home; a young man living at home; a young woman living away from home; a married man with children, wife not working; a married woman, no child at home, husband not working; and a single mother with young children.

Of course the assumption about the perceived salience of household need is not buried very deeply, and one might see it as a self-corroborating exercise in which respondents rank in “need” order, merely reproducing the researchers’ assumptions about the salience of need and obligations. In this we could see a clear example of the imposition of meaning. The researcher establishes, through structured questions, a conceptual framework to which respondents obligingly orient (regardless of its relevance to them). The researcher then mistakenly remains convinced of the value of the conceptual framework. We know from survey research how readily respondents engage in the task with which they are presented and rarely challenge the framework in which questions are asked, regardless of their perceived salience in the eyes of the respondent (e.g., Pawson, 1989). Yet in the responses to the question described previously is a patterning that suggests that something rather more interesting than “theory in, theory out” is going on.

It should be noted that the question was part of a small survey conducted in the context of an undermining of young adults’ status in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s. A reading of the contemporary literature would suggest that ideological, individualizing processes prevented youths from seeing the extent of their exploitation and deterio-

rating relative position. Additionally, a reading of the literature would suggest that, at a minimum, a self-interested age preference would prevail. This implied that respondents would commend youth first. Few did. The overwhelming majority favored the claims of the single mother or the married man. This might at first seem to be a classic example of a self-corroborating exercise, in which respondents reflect back the assumptions embedded in the response categories. However, the patterning of responses suggests that we are accessing reflections on the structure of resource distribution from different vantage points within it. What is especially notable is that the young adults, who were themselves still dependent on parents and/or without dependents of their own, favored the claim of the single mother. A lack of financial obligations tallied with a likelihood of positive discrimination in favor of the single mother. Those who were themselves married or cohabiting or had dependent children of their own were far more likely to favor the claim of the married man whose wife was not working. This held for women as well as for men.

The example shows that we can usefully move away from age as the key variable in exploring age-related patterns and explore positions and attitudes as they relate to household/family need and commitments. To do so reveals the connectedness of micro-level perceptions and broader macro-level structures. The respondents’ attitudes show a prioritizing of the claims of those with dependents, but within this structure their attitudes are patterned in relation to their own life-course position and circumstances in respect to household resourcing commitments. We can see a connection between individual orientations and the structures of distribution in which people are embedded, in which those with dependents are more likely to favor the male breadwinner’s claim. Through considering diverse vantage points from within a variegated structure we can see more clearly the links between micro-level orientations and macro-level structures.

Clearly, then, this was not a self-corroborating exercise. Rather, it revealed a diverse pattern of attitudes shaped in relation to people's own household circumstances and a linked prioritizing of claims on work in relation to household needs. Respondents' attitudes reflected the structure of distribution and their position within it. The patterning of responses can be seen as an outcome of practical attitudes to distributional exigencies. In this sense evaluative judgments are shaped in relation to "what is" and reflect people's location within an asymmetrical pattern of distribution.

I have used both examples in the area of youth to argue that there is connectedness between people's outlooks, attitudes, and their social positioning. This theme of coherence between orientations and position within the social structure runs through the next two examples, which both relate to issues of gender and employment.

Work-Rich and Work-Poor Households: Using Data to Address Puzzles of Explanation

The details of my next example come from research conducted in the early 1990s, but the focus on puzzle solving and its value for social explanation retains its currency today. There is a parallel here with Erzberger and Kelle's (2003) advocacy of theoretical renewal as a response to divergent conclusions drawn from qualitative and quantitative evidence. The example is based on research into social relationships and economic change in the northeast of England, in the context of industrial restructuring through the 1980s (Morris, 1995). A concern was with the concentration of employment and unemployment at the level of the household. This showed a distinct patterning at a national level, a patterning paralleled in a survey of 790 couples in Hartlepool undertaken in 1989 (Irwin & Morris, 1993). The general patterning, which is well known, can be described as a division between work-rich and work-poor households. The period from the 1970s through the 1980s had mani-

festated a growing concentration. In 1986, at a national level, 67% of men in paid employment had spouses also in paid work compared with 24% of unemployed men. Various studies revealed similar patterns, and researchers sought to understand the processes shaping this concentration of employment and unemployment at the household level among married couples. Much of the research was framed by the question: What do the wives of unemployed men do? A principal hypothesis of social policy researchers was that the social security structure provided a significant disincentive to work among women with unemployed husbands. At the time, social security and benefits for the unemployed carried very low earnings entitlements for dependents. Above a minimal earning allowance for the spouse, benefits were withdrawn, pound for pound. There was, therefore, a clear economic logic for a married woman not to work if her husband was drawing unemployment benefit or income support. This "social security" explanation remained a dominant understanding of causality in the patterning of work-rich and work-poor households.

Interestingly, some alternative, although complementary, explanations followed a similar theory of causality. For example, some argued the importance of a "bruised machismo" effect: that cultures of and beliefs about masculinity and breadwinning worked against a wife being employed if her husband was unemployed. However, in both explanations, there was a focus on the level of the household, with women's labor-force participation understood *in terms of their husbands'* labor-force status. We can note a gendered assumption here about his independence and her dependence and the assumption of some external causal process (social security disincentive structure, cultural mores) having an impact on couples and shaping unemployment outcomes.

A problem here lay with the failure to test out the assumptions embedded in the theory. Interestingly, though, this could be done. In the 1980 Women and Employment

Survey (WES), nonworking women married to unemployed men were asked to state their reasons for not themselves working. Eighty percent did not cite their husbands' employment status as a cause (Joshi, 1984). Of the 17% who said it was important, only 14 out of 58, or 4% of the total, said they did not work because their household benefits would be cut. This evidence was echoed in the Hartlepool survey. There was a concentration of employment and unemployment in households, with 67% of households having an employed male with an employed female partner, in contrast to 21% in which the male partner was unemployed. In open-ended questions within the survey, only 12% of nonworking women said they were unavailable to work because their spouses' benefits would be cut. This verbatim evidence, with its limited mention of benefits, appears to directly contradict the assumptions of the social security model of causality. It is a nice example of a research puzzle. To explain its resolution, we can, here, consider one particular finding (for more detail and discussion of further evidence, see Irwin & Morris, 1993).

Other studies sought to control for possible intervening factors to ensure that they had identified a "pure" causal effect. For example, they controlled by class, assuming that to do so was to control socioeconomic status. Thus if, for each class, employed husbands have employed wives and unemployed husbands have nonworking wives, we can be more confident that we have a pure causal effect: It is his labor-force status that affects her labor-force status. However, if we stop looking at women's status under the assumption that it is caused by their husbands' status, a different picture emerges. A range of indicators revealed a direct association between women's own positions and their husbands' labor-force status. For example, there was a strong association between women's own occupational standing (from their current or most recent jobs) and whether or not their husbands were unemployed, even controlling for the husband's

social class. To illustrate, among unskilled husbands, 53% of those who were employed were married to women whose most recent jobs were in low-status occupations, in contrast to 90% of unemployed unskilled husbands. Broad class groupings are clearly very inadequate as a measure of social disadvantage and advantage. The example is drawn from wider evidence in the dataset that the concentration of employment and unemployment is more effectively explained by a similarity within couples of employment chances; the coincidence of spouses' unemployment is closely linked to their similar, independently held disadvantages in relation to employment opportunities. The new interpretation presents a direct challenge to the social security explanation. Importantly, the new analysis of the aggregate data provides an explanation that is in line with open-ended question data on women's self-reported experience. In consequence, it enables an improved understanding of the social structuring of advantage and disadvantage across households. Tackling contradictions arising from interpretations of available data and their reinterpretation can allow us to transform our understanding and develop a more inclusive explanatory framework.

The next example maintains the theme of gender relations and explores quantitative and qualitative data to reveal the close links between people's social position and their evaluations of the right thing to do in respect to work and care.

***Reshaping Gender, Work, and Caregiving:
Exploring the Connectedness of Attitudes
and Social Position in a Context of Change***

The example here is drawn from work in the area of gender, work, and caregiving. In it I draw together evidence in building a picture of diversity and change in women's commitments to child care and employment. The analysis offers an alternative account to the influential view that values are more autonomous of social circumstances than they were

in the past (e.g., Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; and, from a different perspective, Hakim, 2000; see also Irwin, 2005, for the detailed account).

In the United Kingdom, full-time child care among women with preschool children is quite common. However, the incidence of full-time care has fallen dramatically over recent decades. The increase in labor-force participation rates has been most marked since the 1980s. Among women with children ages 0–4, in the years 1949, 1959, and 1969, overall employment participation rates stood at 14%, 15%, and 22%, respectively. The full-time employment participation rate across these years was constant at around 8%. In the years 1981, 1991, and 2001, the overall employment participation rate of women with children ages 0–4 rose from 24 to 42 to 54%, respectively. The full-time employment rates across these years rose from 6 to 13 to 18%, respectively.

There is a wealth of research in the area. Through the 1980s and 1990s, many writers emphasized continuity in women's position of relative disadvantage, given the extent to which the increase in participation was in part-time, flexible, and often low-paying work (e.g., Arber & Ginn, 1995; Hakim, 1996). More recently, there has been recognition that the growth of women's employment participation in late-20th-century Britain is bound up with important changes in the economic and social positioning of women and men (Bruegel & Perrons, 1998; Irwin, 1999, 2005; Walby, 1997). Several writers have presented evidence of an erosion of breadwinner patterns of household resourcing over the past three decades, with a rise in the incidence of dual-earner households and a growing importance of female earnings for household support. This does not betoken simply an improvement in the earnings of women, as it is also bound up with a decline in the relative adequacy of male earnings among some men, particularly those in manual-labor jobs (Bruegel & Perrons, 1998; Egerton & Savage, 2000; Irwin, 1995, 1999). I have argued elsewhere

that these changes in women's and men's relations to employment, earning, and each other are linked to changes in occupational structures but are also not separable from changing norms about women's paid employment through family building, from women's claims for independence, nor from changing perceptions of adequate standards of living (Irwin, 2005).

A significant strand of recent research, in seeking to locate change, maintains that values are more important than they were in the past in shaping decisions about work and care. Some argue that attitudes and preferences play a significant role in shaping behaviors (e.g., Hakim, 2000; Hattery, 2001; Marks & Houston, 2002). However, although attitudes and preferences are clearly important motivators, we need to be cautious about seeing them as newly "loosened" from social structural arrangements. The data explored here are part of a wider argument that there is still a close alignment between subjective orientations and social and economic circumstances. There is evidence for this at different levels. We can see it in both general and more targeted social attitudinal data and their association with circumstance. We can see it in qualitative data that explore women's circumstances and their perceptions of the "right thing to do." What is notable about the latter is the link between many women's values and their current positions in a context of significant changes in women's relations to paid work and child care.

Attitudinal data provides a very particular lens, as do other kinds of data, on the processes in which we are interested (cf. Mason, 2002). Attitudinal data are sometimes treated like a thermometer, an instrument to measure the collective temperature, a kind of average of the national outlook on crucial issues. There are plenty of critics of attitudinal surveys; in particular, many find fault with the superficial nature of attitudinal statements. As discussed briefly earlier, responses are not mere artifacts of imposed meaning. In the examples here, they reveal a

clear pattern of covariation with material and situational factors.

General attitudes toward women's roles and appropriate patterns of behavior among parents run broadly in parallel with actual changes in women's employment participation rates (e.g., Crompton, Brockmann, & Wiggins, 2003; Dex, 1988). So, for example, when asked whether a married woman with children under school age ought to work or stay at home, in 1965 78% of female survey respondents thought she should stay at home. In 1980, 60% of respondents thought she should do so (Hunt, 1968, and Martin & Roberts, 1984, as cited in Dex, 1988). In the 2002 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), 46% of female respondents thought that women with a preschool-age child should stay at home. (In the 2002 BSAS women were asked: "Do you think that women should work outside the home full time, part time, or not at all under these circumstances?" for different categories, including when there is a child under school age.) Notably, the 1965 and 2002 figures compare particularly closely with actual participation rates at the time.

The preceding discussion of change is indicative only, but it gives a sense of a shift across the British population toward more pro-work attitudes on behalf of mothers of young children. Generalized attitudes may be of some interest in taking the national pulse, but they hold more limited use in understanding the actions of different parts of the social body. We can usefully consider in more depth the variable patterning of attitudes among those for whom the issues have a more direct salience. It is possible to see the close links between people's own circumstances and their attitudes when we do so. For example, working mothers are in favor of mothers working, and homemaker mothers are not. In the 2002 BSAS, 16% of homemaker mothers of preschool children felt that a woman in the same situation should work, and 64% felt that she should stay at home. In contrast, 66% of working mothers felt that such a woman should

work, whereas 16% felt that she should stay at home (a ratio of 4:1 homemaker women favor staying at home; a ratio of more than 4:1 working women favor working). Clearly there is little evidence of a dissonance between experience and attitudes; rather, we see a noteworthy consistency.

We need to consider a risk that the link between attitudes and experience/situation is tautological. It is possible that, if people do not feel particularly strongly about something or have not much reflected on it, their response to an attitude statement may simply be based on their practical experience. What they are familiar with may simply translate for them, in giving a survey response, into the "right thing to do," even, perhaps especially, if they have not given it much thought. This is a risk and a potential problem for attitudinal survey research. However, we can plausibly expect that those for whom the question has most direct salience will have given it some thought—that is, they will see the statement as tapping into something relevant to them. Additionally, we can note that the patterning of attitudes is closely aligned to social circumstances more widely and not just to their behavior. At this point we can be more confident that the patterning of responses is not simply an artifact of the mode of asking questions.

Different datasets yield evidence of an association between people's circumstances and their attitudes. I consider an example of data gathered within a small survey, conducted as part of the research by the Economic and Social Research Council Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA). In this "Life as a Parent" survey, the distributions of attitudes were explored. Women who were most in favor of full-time maternal child care (based on three attitudinal variables and described as "pro-maternal care") were identified, with a view to comparison with Hakim's (2000) argument that there is class-random diversity in their outlooks. It is notable that in this dataset the women were all in similar socioeconomic circumstances. The 14 out of

96 women interviewed who were “pro-care” were all relatively constrained in their employment options but were not among the most disadvantaged, and most of them were living with an employed partner. If these women worked, it was part time, and in only one case did the woman describe herself as working for “essentials,” whereas half of the women who were not in the “pro-maternal care” group described themselves as working for this reason. A similar analysis of national-level BSAS data, using the two parallel attitudinal questions, also shows that those who are “pro-maternal care” fall within the lower half of household income groups but not among the lowest. This evidence runs counter to arguments that “values are becoming more important determinants of behaviour, relative to . . . social structural factors” (Hakim, 2000, pp. 80–81). It suggests ongoing links between values and circumstances.

We can also explore perceptions of the appropriate commitments of mothers through qualitative data. The Mothers, Care, and Employment (MCE) project was a qualitative study also conducted as part of the CAVA research project. It was conducted across different locales in Yorkshire and Lancashire, England. Parents (mostly mothers) of children age 14 and under were interviewed, with a particular focus on issues of value and people’s sense of “doing the right thing” in respect to caring for their children (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2003; Duncan & Irwin, 2004; see also Duncan & Edwards, 1999). The data allow us to further reflect on general developments in the relative position of women in particular. It seems likely that the salience of work as a crucial component of women’s identities has a greater spread across the population and that it is growing among groups for whom it has traditionally been a less definitive experience or expectation. The data show an alignment between circumstance and values, yet these values reveal a significant work ethic among women who are mothers of young children. This is a feature of middle-class re-

spondents, many of whom see work as a core part of their identities. But it is also a theme for many white working-class respondents with more circumscribed opportunities and perhaps more circumscribed motivations for work. Women hold work as more central to their identities, and more white mothers, including working-class mothers, have a work-related identity, as well as a mother identity. This is consistent with the trends toward increased employment rates among women over the past quarter century. Although some groups of working-class mothers have always worked, employment participation among mothers of preschool children (0–4) is becoming more extensive. The MCE evidence reveals the very routine nature of work among women and suggests that it would disrupt their sense of themselves if they were to stop work fully through the family-building period.

Even among the relatively few, typically working-class, women defined by Duncan and colleagues (2003) as “primarily mother,” who express clearly their high level of commitment to full-time parental care for their children, there is a clear sense of paid work as a core part of their identities. For example, Theresa encapsulates what Duncan terms a “primarily mother” orientation:

“I believe if you have children you should fetch ’em up yourself rather than like you get your career mums who can go out to work and somebody else has fetched your child up and I don’t believe in that really.”

Nevertheless, this woman returned to work as a health care assistant when her child was 10 months old. She has a job-share arrangement with her husband, and both work 25 hours a week as care assistants. When asked “And you say that that is because you found it difficult to be just at home?”, she replied:

“Yeah. Yeah I found it hard work, I needed to see other people and do other things as well as be at home. I needed to be myself as well as being a mum.”

That is, although her commitment to caregiving may be paramount, she still sees work and its sociability as core aspects of her identity.

Other interviewees expressed further dimensions of the importance of work to them. For example, Jessica said:

“I work so that I can give my son everything that I’ve never had and so that I can provide for him and if he wants anything he can have it, not to spoil him but to make sure that . . . we can provide a decent standard of living.”

In discussing her return to work when her son was young, she said:

“I wanted to go back to work. I don’t know why, but I did. I think it were, it were important for me to get back to being that person, not just being me little boy’s mum.”

Another respondent who encapsulates the “primarily mother” orientation was Christine, who said:

“I couldn’t see t’point of having a child and leaving him with somebody else.”

Christine was from Barnsley, a traditional coal mining town and therefore a cultural context in which we might expect Duncan’s “primarily mother” orientation (Duncan et al., 2003) to be common. Christine has five children and, despite her orientation, she has worked fairly extensively in unskilled (factory and cleaning) jobs while building her family. Her desire for work is financial, although such a motivation needs to be understood in the context of cultural expectations about adequacy. It is also linked to other aspects of her identity, especially the expectation of independence:

“My husband always, always wanted me to stop working yeah. Ye know, this were always a bit of friction between me and [him] . . . ’cos he’d always say we’ll cope

and we’ll manage ye know but I were always, I’ve always had money so I were always scared of just relying on his wage and then I’d say yeah, but what happens when I want summat and what happens if I want to do summat or I want to buy a new coat . . . do I ask you for money, I says: ‘I don’t think it’ll work out like that’ and he says ‘yeah yeah of course you ask me’ but ye know, its not, I can’t. I’ve always had a job, from 19 I’ve always worked and I’ve always had me own money.”

To work seems an important part of her identity and the kind of role model she wants to be for her children (traditionally associated with black women’s orientations to work and care) (Duncan & Edwards, 1999):

“I want my children to work, I want ‘em to work, I want em to do good at school, as good as they can ye know, and try and try and get on.”

So even among those who have few qualifications and who express Duncan’s “primarily mother” orientation, it is notable that strongly expressed caregiving commitments are consistent with holding a significant work ethic. A sense of paid work appears to be a core component of the identity of a wide spectrum of women who have young children. It is common for this ethic to be bound up with women’s desire for independence and autonomy.

As well as the importance of work to these women’s sense of themselves and their self-esteem, it is notable that their views were not necessarily mirrored by their husbands, who, like Christine’s, tended to “fall in” with their wives’ plans following a position of doubt. The expressions here seem illustrative of the differential rate of change in women’s and men’s social positions. Another example of a husband falling in with his wife’s desires is evident in the responses of Lisa, mother of five children. When asked if her husband was supportive when she returned to work, she said:

“When I first started for t’first few weeks he didn’t like it—and we did have a few arguments and I says ‘look, we either argue over t’fact that we don’t see each other and you’re tired and you’re coming home and seeing to t’kids or we argue over money’. I says ‘it’s like Hobson’s choice, which would you prefer? And he says ‘I know you’re right,’ he says, ‘carry on, we’ll give it a bit longer,’ and he’s fine now, got used to it, the routine and there’s no problem at all, he’s quite all right with it.”

The interview data is illustrative of individual-level experiences in a way that quantitative data cannot be, but it is consistent with the themes that are revealed through the general-level numerical data. From the 1970s there has been a marked rise in the employment rates of partnered mothers of young children. Work has become a more routinized experience within the family-building period. The quantitative evidence indicates that this is so for a larger section of the population. Qualitative data reveal the importance of work as a more core component of women’s identities through the family-building period, and this includes working-class women who are relatively disadvantaged in their employment prospects. A pattern of mutuality between norms and women’s (and men’s) social positioning is evident in a period of significant changes in women’s employment patterns. This is important. The different sources of evidence allow us to build a picture of diversity and change, and it is one that invites us to challenge and reinterrogate arguments that we are witnessing a historically new kind of division between norms and social structural processes. Different data sources give insights into social change, here notably change in the circumstances and social identities of women, and men, relating to employment and child care. Additionally, the evidence reminds us that gender, taken as a description of social division in those domains, is itself subject to change.

Across the examples I have given, I have drawn on different sources of evidence in re-

examining the links between macro- and micro-level processes. In the examples of youth and of gender, work, and caregiving, I argued against accounts in which the subjective and objective are treated as distinct social “domains.” Such accounts are associated with theoretical arguments of a new separation between social structural and subjective understandings. These arguments posit a new autonomy of values and choices, as in preference and individualization theories, and claims about ideology, in which external categories are imported to explain the seeming noncorrespondence of subjective and objective. However, a reinterrogation of data at different levels and an improved understanding of diversity and the locatedness of different vantage points allow us to see more clearly the connectedness of subjective and objective. It is by moving between levels of evidence that we can better access processes that shape diversity and change in gendered commitments to work and care. In the example of unemployment patterns, I addressed a puzzle arising from different data sources and their interpretation and sought a more expansive explanation through tackling and resolving the puzzle. All the examples reveal the connectedness of micro and macro, the subjective and the social structural. And in all, the use of evidence from different “levels” adds to our capacity to explain social pattern and process.

Conclusion

Linking methods is increasingly seen as a way forward in advancing social explanation. In this chapter I have argued that linking data from different levels of “the social” is important for many social science research questions and is crucial in cases in which we are seeking to understand social diversity and social change. Through a series of empirical examples, I have argued that bringing together macro- and micro-level data can contribute to better understanding of the connectedness of subjective orientations and social structural arrangements and

improve our understanding of important social processes.

The linking of macro- and micro-level data is not first and foremost a technical issue but a conceptual one. Using a metaphor of our research problems as multifaceted, I have argued that different methods and different sources of data provide a *particular* lens on the social phenomena or processes being researched. Single sources of data can give us a partial picture, but it may also be one that is distorting. We cannot simply build up an adequate picture by piecing together the different components of evidence. Data themselves are not theory neutral but carry within them assumptions about how they relate to the phenomena under study. This does not mean that different data sources are incompatible. Nor does it mean that we will only reproduce the assumptions embedded within the data-collection tools. Seeking to bring together data can help clarify the nature of the phenomena under study by forcing us to confront the particularity and the theoretically imbued nature of different kinds of evidence. Linking data from different levels may make us aware not simply that what we see is part of a bigger story but that we may be in the wrong story altogether. Correspondingly, it has the potential to contribute to theoretical expansion or transformation.

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