RESEARCH ELEMENTS

THE DISCOVERY OF NEW EMPIRICAL FACTS

New facts can reflect the identification of social regularity or variation in social processes. We view such facts as phenomena that require explanation. In recent years, members of the department have identified and described many new empirical facts, including aspects of contemporary family structures, organizational processes, economic development, political protest, fertility patterns, consequences of migration, gender relations, social network structures, and the effects of sample survey measurement on social understandings. We rely on a variety of data sources to reveal empirical patterns, including electronic communication data (e.g., twitter), surveys, censuses, ethnographies, historical archives, simulations, and experiments, and are quite catholic in our methodological taste. By emphasizing careful empirical pattern identification, we contribute to the development of new sociological questions, and stimulate new theoretical approaches that will enhance our understanding of social phenomenon.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

While careful description of sociological phenomenon is a crucial first step, full understanding requires the identification of the social processes that generate observed patterns. Such mechanisms are an essential part of theory building, and research by members of our faculty has offered accounts for a wide variety of empirical phenomena—from fertility patterns to genocide, from variation in tax collection to the causes of delinquency among adolescents. Although the content and character of these theoretical innovations varies widely, our general approach to theory-building is characterized by three characteristics: (1) We propose specific causal mechanisms that are generalizable in principle—e.g. not limited to particular substantive areas; (2) These mechanisms are typically multilevel in nature, in the sense that they involve interaction between individuals and larger social entities; and (3) Our theories are formulated to have testable empirical implications.

ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL THEORIES

Progress in understanding the social world comes from evaluating specific ideas about how people interact with one another and their environment. In other words, the field advances when we can determine what theory best accounts for a particular empirical finding. The UW Sociology Department has an international reputation for designing research studies and developing statistical, experimental, and qualitative methods that enable us to test rival theories proposed to account for social phenomena.