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PART I RESEARCH COMMUNITIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES Bridget Somekh Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK Erica Burman Research Institute of Health and Social Change, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK Sara Delamont Department of Sociology, Cardiff University, UK Julienne Meyer St Bartholomew’s School of Nursing and Midwifery, City University, UK Malcolm Payne St Christopher’s Hospice, London, UK Richard Thorpe Leeds University Business School, UK The authors would like to thank Fazal Rizvi, Professor in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois, USA, and an Adjunct Professor at Deakin University, Australia, for providing additional material to strengthen the international perspectives in this chapter. Key features of research in the social sciences Bridget Somekh Research in the social sciences draws on various long-established traditions. Its origins might, for example, be said to lie with the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who developed ways of conceptualizing and categorizing knowledge, truth and human experience during the fourth century BC. Fundamentally, social science research is concerned with people and their life contexts, and with philosophical questions relating to the nature of knowledge and truth (epistemology), values (axiology) and being (ontology) which underpin human judgements and activities. Empirical social science research — that is research which involves the collection of data about people and their social contexts by a range of methods — draws heavily upon the traditions and practices of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and creative arts. Anthropology contributes a tradition of participant observation and interviews, field note-taking and heuristic interpretation of culture. For example, from Geertz we learn the importance of reading the cultural meanings in details of behaviour such as winks, and writing about research using ‘ thick description’ to give readers the experience of ‘ being there’ (Geertz, 1973). From sociology, we learn how social relations are formed and reproduced. Psychology provides us with an understanding of human behaviour. History contributes a tradition of document analysis (the weighing of evidence in the light of the likely biases of the informant) and accords importance to contemporary records, including personal testimony in letters and note books. The creative arts contribute a tradition of aesthetics (discernment and judgement of worth) and accord importance to creativity and imagination in