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The nature and process of social research

Chapter outline

Introduction	4
What is meant by 'social research'?	4
Why do social research?	5
The context of social research methods	5
Elements of the process of social research	8
Literature review	8
Concepts and theories	8
Research questions	9
Sampling cases	11
Data collection	12
Data analysis	13
Writing up	14
The messiness of social research	15
<i>Key points</i>	16
<i>Questions for review</i>	16





Chapter guide

This chapter aims to introduce readers to some fundamental considerations in conducting social research. It begins by outlining what we mean by social research and the reasons why we conduct it. However, the bulk of the chapter then moves on to consider three areas:

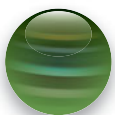
- *The context of social research methods.* This entails considering issues such as the role of theory in relation to social research, the role of values and in particular of ethical considerations in the research process, the significance of assumptions about the nature of the social world and about how knowledge about it should be produced, and the ways in which political considerations may materialize in social research.
- *The elements of the research process.* The whole book is dedicated to the elements of social research, but here the essential stages are given a preliminary treatment. The elements identified are: a literature review; formulating concepts and theories; devising research questions; sampling; data collection; data analysis; and writing up findings.
- *The messiness of social research.* This section acknowledges that social research often does not conform to a neat, linear process and that researchers may find themselves facing unexpected contingencies and difficulties. At the same time, it is suggested that a familiarity with the nature of the research process and its principles is crucial to navigating through the unexpected.

All of the issues presented in these three sections will be treated in much greater detail in later chapters, but they are introduced at this stage to provide readers with an early encounter with them.

Introduction

This book is concerned with the ways that social researchers go about their craft. I take this to mean that it is concerned with the approaches that are employed by social researchers to go about the research process in all its phases—formulating research objectives, choosing research methods, securing research participants, collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, and disseminating findings to others. An understanding of social research methods is important for several reasons, but two stand out. First, it is hoped that it will help readers to avoid the many pitfalls that are all too common when relatively inexperienced people try to do social research, such as failing to match research questions to research methods, asking ambiguous questions in **questionnaires**,

and engaging in practices that are ethically dubious. If you are expected to conduct a research project, an education in research methods is important, not just for ensuring that the correct procedures are followed but also for gaining an appreciation of the choices that are available to you. Second, an understanding of social research methods is also important from the point of view of being a consumer of published research. When people take degrees in the social sciences, they will read a lot of published research in the substantive areas they study. A good grounding in the research process and a knowledge of the potential pitfalls can provide a critical edge when reading the research of others that can be invaluable.



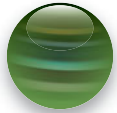
What is meant by ‘social research’?

The term ‘social research’ as used in this book denotes *academic* research on topics relating to questions relevant

to the social scientific fields, such as sociology, human geography, social policy, politics, and criminology. Thus,

social research involves research that draws on the social sciences for conceptual and theoretical inspiration. Such research may be motivated by developments and changes in society, such as the rise in worries about security or binge-drinking, but it employs social scientific ideas to illuminate those changes. It draws upon the social sciences for ideas about how to formulate

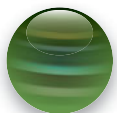
research topics and issues and how to interpret and draw implications from research findings. In other words, what distinguishes social research of the kind discussed in this book is that it is deeply rooted in the ideas and intellectual traditions of the social sciences. This book is about the methods that are used to create that kind of research.



Why do social research?

The rationale for doing social research has been outlined in the previous section to a certain extent. Academics conduct such research because, in the course of reading the literature on a topic or when reflecting on what is going on in modern social life, questions occur to them. They may notice a gap in the literature or an inconsistency between a number of studies or an unresolved issue in the literature. These provide common circumstances that act as springboards for social research in academic circles. Another is when there is a development in society that provides an interesting point of departure for the investigation of a research question. For example, noting

the widespread use of text messaging on mobile telephones, a researcher might become interested in studying how far it has affected the nature and quality of interaction in social life. In exploring this kind of issue, the researcher is likely to draw upon the literature on technology and on social interaction to provide insights into how to approach the issue. As I say in Chapter 2, there is no single reason why people do social research of the kind emphasized in this book, but, at its core, it is done because there is an aspect of our understanding of what goes on in society that is to some extent unresolved.



The context of social research methods

Social research and its associated methods do not take place in a vacuum. In this book, a number of factors that form the context of social research will be mentioned. The following factors form part of the context within which social research and its methods operate:

- The *theories* that social scientists employ to help to understand the social world have an influence on what is researched and how the findings of research are interpreted. In other words, the topics that are investigated are profoundly influenced by the available theoretical positions. Thus, if a researcher was interested in the impact of mobile phone text messaging on sociability, it is quite likely that he or she would want to take into account prevailing theories about how technology is used and its impacts. In this way, social research is informed and influenced by theory. It also contributes to theory because the findings of a study will feed into the stock of knowledge to which the theory relates.
- As the previous point implies, the existing knowledge about the area in which the researcher is interested forms an important part of the background within which social research takes place. In practice, this means that someone planning to conduct research must be familiar with the *literature* on the topic or area of interest. You have to be acquainted with what is already known about the research area in which you are interested so that you can build on it and not risk covering the same ground as others. Reviewing the literature is the main focus of Chapter 5 and is also an ingredient of other chapters, such as Chapter 29.
- The researcher's views about the nature of the *relationship between theory and research* also have implications for research. For some practitioners, theory is something that is addressed at the beginning of a research project. The researcher might be viewed as

engaging in some theoretical reflections out of which a **hypothesis** is formulated and then subsequently tested. An alternative position is to view theory as an outcome of the research process—that is, as something that is arrived at after the research has been carried out. This difference has implications for research, because the first approach implies that a set of theoretical ideas drive the collection and analysis of data whereas the second suggests a more open-ended strategy in which theoretical ideas emerge out of the data. Of course, as is so often the case in discussions of this kind, the choice is rarely as stark as this account of the relationship between theory and research implies, but it does imply that there are some contrasting views about the role of theory in relation to research. This issue will be a major focus of Chapter 2.

- The assumptions and views about how research should be conducted influence the research process. It is often assumed that a ‘scientific’ approach will and should be followed, in which a hypothesis is formulated and then tested using precise measurement techniques. Such research definitely exists, but the view that this is how research should be done is by no means universally shared. Considerations of this kind are referred to as **epistemological** ones. They raise questions about, and invite us to reflect upon, the issue of how the social world should be studied and whether a scientific approach is the right stance to adopt. Some researchers favour an approach that eschews a scientific model, arguing that people and their social institutions are very different from the subject matter of the scientist and that an approach is needed that is more sensitive to the special qualities of people and their social institutions. This issue will be a major focus in Chapter 2.
- The assumptions about the nature of social phenomena influence the research process too. It is sometimes suggested that the social world should be viewed as something that is external to social actors and over which they have no control. It is simply there, acting upon and influencing their behaviour, beliefs, and values. We might view the culture of an organization as a set of values and behavioural expectations that exert a powerful influence over those who work in the organization and into which new recruits have to be socialized. But we could also view it as an entity that is in a constant process of reformulation and reassessment, as members of the organization continually modify it through their practices and through small

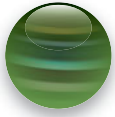
innovations in how things are done. Considerations of this kind are referred to as **ontological** ones. They invite us to consider the nature of social phenomena—are they relatively inert and beyond our influence or are they very much a product of social interaction? As for epistemological issues discussed in the previous point, the stance that the researcher takes on them has implications for the way in which social research is conducted. This issue will be a major focus of Chapter 2.

- The *values* of the research community have significant implications for researchers. This can take a number of forms. *Ethical issues* have been a point of discussion, and indeed often of considerable dissension, over the years, but in recent times they have soared in prominence. It is now almost impossible to do certain kinds of research without risking the opprobrium of the research community and possible censure from the organizations in which researchers are employed. Nowadays, there is an elaborate framework of bodies that scrutinize research proposals for their ethical integrity, so that transgression of ethical principles becomes ever less likely. Certain kinds of research require special provision with regard to ethics, such as research involving children or vulnerable adults. Thus, ethical values and the institutional arrangements that have arisen in response to the clamour for ethical caution have implications for what and who can be researched and for how research can be conducted to the point where certain research methods and practices are no longer employed. Another way in which the values of the research community can impinge on the researcher is that in certain fields, such as in social policy, there is a strong view that those being researched should be involved in the research process. For example, when social researchers conduct research on service users, it is often suggested that the users of those services should be involved in the formulation of research questions and instruments, such as questionnaires. While such views are not universally held (Becker et al. 2010), they form a consideration that researchers in certain fields may feel compelled to reflect upon when contemplating certain kinds of investigation. Ethical issues are addressed further in Chapter 6 and touched on in several other chapters.
- Related to the previous issue is the question of what research is for. Thus far, I have tended to stress the academic nature and role of social research—namely,

that it is to add to the stock of knowledge about the social world. However, many social scientists feel that research should have a practical purpose and that it should make a difference to the world around us. Such an emphasis means that, for some practitioners, the social sciences should focus on topics and issues that will have *implications for practice*. For researchers in social science disciplines like social policy, an emphasis on investigations having demonstrable implications for practice is more widely held than in it might be in other disciplines. Also, there are research approaches that are more or less exclusively designed to explore issues that will have implications for people's everyday lives, such as **evaluation research** and **action research**, which will be touched upon in Chapters 3 and 17 respectively. However, even in fields like social policy, a commitment to an emphasis on practice is not universally held. In a survey of UK social policy researchers in 2005, Becker, Bryman, and Sempik (2006) found that 53 per cent of all those questioned felt that it was *equally* important for research to have potential value for policy and practice and to lead to the accumulation of knowledge, a further 34 per cent felt it was more important for research to have potential value for policy and practice, and 13 per cent felt it was more important for social policy research to lead to the accumulation of knowledge.

- Social research operates within a wider *political context*. This feature has many aspects and some of these are mentioned in Chapter 6. For example, much social research is funded by government bodies, and these tend to reflect the orientation of the government of the day. This will mean that certain research issues are somewhat more likely to receive financial support than others. Further, for research supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the major funding body for UK social science research, prospective applicants are supposed to demonstrate how potential users of the research will be involved or engaged if the research receives financial support. The notion of a 'user' is capable of being interpreted in a number of different ways, but it is likely to be more straightforward for an applicant to demonstrate the involvement of users when research has a more applied focus. In other words, the stipulation that users must be involved could be taken to give a slight advantage to research with a focus on practice.
- The *training and personal values* of the researcher cannot be ignored. They form a component of the context of social research methods in that they may influence the research area, the research questions, and the methods employed to investigate these. Our experiences and our interests frequently have some influence on the issues we research. As academic social researchers, the issues that interest us have to connect to the wider disciplines of the social sciences. An example referred to in Chapter 2 is O'Reilly's (2000) study of British expatriates living on Spain's Costa Del Sol. The issue was of interest to her because she and her partner were planning to live there themselves. This clearly constitutes a personal interest, but it is not exclusively so, because she used the topic as a lens for raising issues about transnational migration, an issue that has been of great interest to social scientists in recent years. I also mention in Chapter 2 my own interest in the ways in which social science research is reported in the mass media. This grew out of a wounding experience reported in Haslam and Bryman (1994), which led me to develop an interest in the issue more generally, to read a great deal of the literature on the reporting of both science and social science in the media, and to develop it into a research project. Also, social researchers, as a result of their training and sometimes from personal preferences that build up, frequently develop attachments to, or at least preferences for, certain research methods and approaches. One of the reasons why I try to cover a wide range of research methods in this book is because I am convinced that it is important for practising and prospective researchers to be familiar with a diversity of methods and how to implement them. The development of methodological preferences carries the risk of researchers becoming blinkered and restricted in what they know, but it is undoubtedly the case that such preferences often do emerge and have implications for the conduct of research.

It is impossible to arrive at an exhaustive list of factors that are relevant to this section, but it is hoped that the discussion above will provide a flavour of the ways in which the conduct of social research and the choice of research methods are not hermetically sealed off from wider influences.



Elements of the process of social research

In this section and the rest of this chapter, I will introduce what I think are the main elements of most research projects. It is common for writers of textbooks on social research methods to compile flow charts of the research process, and I am not immune to this temptation, as you will see from, for example, Figures 2.1, 8.1, and 17.1! At this point, I am not going to try to sequence the various stages or elements of the research process, as the sequencing varies somewhat according to different research strategies and approaches. All I want to do at this juncture is to introduce some of the main elements—in other words, elements that are common to all or most varieties of social research. Some of them have already been touched on in the previous section and all of them will be addressed further and in more detail in later chapters.

Literature review

The existing literature represents an important element in all research. When we have alighted upon a topic or issue that interests us, we must read further to determine a number of things. We need to know:

- what is already known about the topic;
- what concepts and theories have been applied to the topic;
- what research methods have been applied to the topic;
- what controversies about the topic and how it is studied exist;
- what clashes of evidence (if any) exist;
- who the key contributors to research on the topic are.

Many topics have a rich tradition of research, so it is unlikely that many people, such as students doing an undergraduate or postgraduate Master's dissertation, will be able to conduct an exhaustive review of the literature in such areas. What is crucial is that you establish and read the key books and articles and some of the main figures who have written in the field. As I suggest in Chapter 5, it is crucial that you know what is known, so that you cannot be accused of not doing your homework and therefore of naively going over old ground. Also, being able to link your own research questions, findings, and discussion to the existing literature is an important and

useful way of demonstrating the credibility and contribution of your research. However, as will become clear from reading Chapter 5, a literature review is not simply a summary of the literature that has been read. The written literature review is expected to be critical. This does not necessarily mean that you are expected to be highly critical of the authors you read, but it does mean that you are supposed to assess the significance of their work and how each item fits into the narrative about the literature that you construct when writing a literature review.

Concepts and theories

Concepts are the way that we make sense of the social world. They are essentially labels that we give to aspects of the social world that seem to have common features that strike us as significant. As outlined in Chapter 7, the social sciences have a strong tradition of concepts, many of which have become part of the language of everyday life. Concepts such as bureaucracy, power, social control, status, charisma, labour process, cultural capital (see Research in focus 1.1 for an example using this concept), McDonaldization, alienation, and so on are very much part of the theoretical edifice that generations of social scientists have constructed. Concepts are a key ingredient of theories. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine a theory that did not have at least one concept embedded in it.

Concepts serve several purposes in the conduct of social research. They are important to how we organize and signal to intended audiences our research interests. They help us to think about and be more disciplined about what it is we want to find out about and at the same time help with the organization of our research findings. In the section on 'The context of social research methods' it was noted briefly that the relationship between theory and research is often depicted as involving a choice between theories driving the research process in all its phases and theories as a product of the research process. This is invariably depicted as the contrast between respectively **deductive** and **inductive** approaches to the relationship between theory and research and is something that will be expanded upon in Chapter 2. Unsurprisingly, this contrast has implications for concepts. Concepts may be viewed as something we start out

with and that represent key areas around which data are collected in an investigation. In other words, we might collect data in order to shed light on a concept or more likely several concepts and how they are connected. This is the approach taken in the investigation reported in Research in focus 1.1. The alternative view is that concepts are outcomes of research. According to this second view, concepts help us to reflect upon and organize the data that we collect. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive positions. In research, we often start out with some key concepts that help us to orient to our subject matter but, as a result of collecting data and interpreting them, we possibly revise those concepts, or new ones emerge through our reflections.

One of the reasons why familiarity with the existing literature in a research area (the issue covered in the previous section) is so important is that it alerts us to

some of the main concepts that past researchers have employed and how useful or limited those concepts have been in helping to unravel the main issues. Research in focus 1.1 provides an example of this tendency in that the concept of cultural capital is employed for its possible insights into the process of students being accepted or rejected when applying for entry to Oxford University. Even when we are reading the literature solely as consumers of research—for example, when writing an essay—knowing what the key concepts are, who is responsible for them, and what controversies there are (if any) surrounding them can be crucial.

Research questions

Research questions have been mentioned in passing on a couple of occasions, and they are implicit in some of



Key concept 1.1

What are research questions?

A research question is a question that provides an explicit statement of what it is the researcher wants to know about. A research purpose can be presented as a statement (for example, 'I want to find out whether (or why) . . .'), but a question forces the researcher to be more explicit about what is to be investigated. A research question must have a question mark at the end of it or else it is not a question. It must be interrogatory. Research in focus 1.1 provides an example of a study with several research questions. A hypothesis is in a sense a form of research question, but it is not stated as a question and provides an anticipation of what will be found out.

Denscombe (2010) has provided a helpful list of types of research question. This list first appeared in an earlier edition, which has been embellished by White (2009). The following types of research question are proposed by Denscombe:

1. Predicting an outcome (does y happen under circumstances a and b ?).
2. Explaining causes and consequences of a phenomenon (is y affected by x or is y a consequence of x ?).
3. Evaluating a phenomenon (does y exhibit the benefits that it is claimed to have?).
4. Describing a phenomenon (what is y like or what forms does y assume?).
5. Developing good practice (how can we improve y ?).
6. Empowerment (how can we enhance the lives of those we research?).

White (2009) is uneasy about Denscombe's last category, arguing that an emphasis on political motives of this kind can impede the conduct of high-quality research. To some extent, this difference of opinion can be attributed to differences in viewpoint about the purposes of research highlighted in the section on 'The context of social research methods'. Rather than the sixth type of research question above, White proposes an alternative:

7. Comparison (do a and b differ in respect of x ?).

There are many ways that research questions can be categorized, and it is also difficult to arrive at an exhaustive list, but these seven types provide a rough indication of the possibilities as well as drawing attention to a controversy about the wider goals of research.

the discussion thus far. Research questions are extremely important in the research process, because they force you to consider that most basic of issues—what is it about your area of interest that you want to know? Most people beginning research start with a general idea of what it is they are interested in. Research questions force you to consider the issue of what it is you want to find out about much more precisely and rigorously. Developing research questions is a matter of narrowing down and focusing more precisely on what it is that you want to know about.

Research questions are, therefore, important. Having no research questions or poorly formulated research questions will lead to poor research. If you do not specify clear research questions, there is a great risk that your research will be unfocused and that you will be unsure about what your research is about and what you are collecting data for. It does not matter how well you design a questionnaire or how skilled an interviewer you are; you must be clear about your research questions. Equally, it does not matter whether your research is for a project with a research grant of £300,000, a doctoral



Research in focus 1.1

Research questions in a study of cultural capital

The focus of the article by Zimdars, Sullivan, and Heath (2009) is the recruitment of students to Oxford University. Recruitment to UK universities and to the elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge has been the focus of political controversy in recent years, because the failure to recruit sufficient numbers of state-school students is seen as elitist and as restricting social mobility. Admissions officers in Oxford and Cambridge universities in particular are often portrayed as displaying class prejudices that constrain the life chances of young people from less privileged backgrounds. The researchers' aim was 'to assess whether cultural capital is linked to success in gaining admission for those who apply' (Zimdars et al. 2009: 653). They then go on to outline their research questions:

Specifically, we address the following questions:

1. How do Oxford applicants vary in their cultural participation and cultural knowledge, according to parents' education, social class, gender and ethnicity?
2. Does cultural capital predict acceptance to Oxford?
3. If so, does its effect remain once we control for examination performance?
4. Is cultural capital more important for admission to the arts and humanities faculties than to the sciences?
5. To what extent does cultural capital mediate the effect of social class, parents' education, private schooling, ethnicity and gender? (Zimdars et al. 2009: 653)

At one level, this research seeks to address issues of relevance to social and educational policy. As noted in the section on 'The context of social research methods', social research sometimes explores issues that are mainly to do with policy and practice. But the researchers are also keen to draw on theory and one key concept in particular—Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital—to help understand the processes underlying the low level of acceptance of state-school applicants at Oxford. Cultural capital refers to an individual's ability to distinguish him- or herself through cultural experiences and competencies. It is argued that such cultural expertise allows the middle class to reproduce itself both culturally and socially and serves to reduce the social and economic opportunities of working-class children.

Zimdars et al. draw primarily on a questionnaire survey of Oxford applicants who applied for entry in 2002. Of particular interest is that the researchers found cultural knowledge to be a more important factor in success at gaining entry than mere cultural participation through visiting museums, galleries, etc. As the authors put it: 'What matters is a relationship of familiarity with culture, rather than just participation in culture' (Zimdars et al. 2009: 661). As such, these findings are only partially supportive of Bourdieu's ideas at least so far as they relate to the issue of gaining admission to Oxford.

thesis, or a small mini-project. Research questions are crucial because they will:

- guide your literature search;
- guide your decisions about the kind of research design to employ;
- guide your decisions about what data to collect and from whom;
- guide your analysis of your data;
- guide your writing-up of your data;
- stop you from going off in unnecessary directions; and
- provide your readers with a clearer sense of what your research is about.

It has been suggested above that research questions will help to guide your literature search for your literature review. However, it is also possible, if not likely, that reading the literature may prompt you to revise your research questions and may even suggest some new ones. Therefore, at an early stage of a research study, research questions and the literature relating to them are likely to be rather intertwined. A plausible sequence at the beginning of a research project is that initial contact with the literature relating to an area of interest suggests one or two research questions and that further reading guided by the initial research questions gives rise to a revision of them or possibly some new ones. In Chapter 4, there will be more discussion of research questions and how they can be developed.



Student experience

Generating and changing research questions

Hannah Creane elaborated on her answers regarding her research questions in an email. She writes:

the three initial research questions I had formulated when I began the study were: what makes a child a child?; what makes an adult an adult?; and to what extent can the child be seen as a 'mini' adult? However, while writing this up I realized that those questions were no longer really the guiding questions for my research. The study has evolved and become more of an empirical reflection of the generational changes within childhood rather than looking specifically at what childhood actually is. It seems to me that the two appropriate questions in relation to the study as a whole now are: What makes a child a child as opposed to an adult?; and to what extent has this changed across the generations?



To read more about Hannah's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Sampling cases

Social research is not always carried out on people. For example, we may want to examine mass-media content and employ a technique like **content analysis**, which is covered in Chapter 13. In such a situation, we are collecting our data from newspapers or television programmes rather than from people. Because of this, it is common for writers on social research methods to use the term 'case' to cover the wide variety of objects on whom or from whom data will be collected. Much if not most of the time, 'cases' will be people. In social research we are rarely in a position in which we can interview, observe, or send questionnaires to all possible individuals who are appropriate to our research and equally we are unlikely to be able to read and analyse the content of all articles in

all newspapers relating to an area of media content that interests us. Time and cost issues will always constrain the number of cases we can include in our research, so we almost always have to sample.

As we will see in later chapters, there are a number of different principles behind sampling. Many people associate sampling with surveys and the quest for **representative samples**. This approach to sampling invariably lies behind sampling for opinion polls of the kind that we often encounter in newspapers. Such sampling is usually based on principles to do with searching for a sample that can represent (and therefore act as a microcosm of) a wider **population**. If newspapers could not make claims about the representativeness of the samples used for the opinion polls they commission, the findings they report about the prospects for political parties would

be less significant. In Chapter 8, the principles that lie behind the quest for the representative sample will be explained. These principles do not apply solely to questionnaire **survey research** of the kind described in Research in focus 1.1 but may also apply to other kinds of investigation—for example, when sampling newspaper articles for a content analysis of media content. By no means all forms of social science research prioritize representative samples. In several of the chapters in Part Three we will encounter sampling principles that are based not on the idea of representativeness but on the notion that samples should be selected on the basis of their appropriateness to the purposes of the investigation. Also, in **case study** research, there may be just one or two units of analysis. With such research, the goal is to understand the selected case or cases in depth. Sampling issues are relevant to such research as well. Quite aside from the fact that the case or cases have to be selected according to criteria relevant to the research, those individuals who are members of the case study context have to be sampled according to criteria too. However, the chief point to register at this juncture is that sampling is an inevitable feature of most if not all kinds of social research and therefore constitutes an important stage of any investigation.

Data collection

To many people, data collection represents the key point of any research project, and it is probably not surprising therefore that this book probably gives more words and pages to this stage in the research process than any other. Some of the methods of data collection covered in this book, such as interviewing and questionnaires, are probably more familiar to many readers than some of the others. Some methods entail a rather structured approach to data collection—that is, the researcher establishes in advance the broad contours of what he or she needs to find out about and designs research instruments to implement what needs to be known. The questionnaire is an example of such an instrument; the researcher establishes what he or she needs to know to answer the research questions that drive the project and designs questions in the questionnaire that will allow data to be collected to answer those research questions. Similarly, something like a **structured interview**—the kind of interview used in survey investigations—includes a host of questions designed for exactly the same purpose. It is unfortunate that we use the same word—question—for both research questions and the kinds of questions that are posed in questionnaires and interviews. They are

very different: a research question is a question designed to indicate what the purpose of an investigation is; a questionnaire question is one of many questions that are posed in a questionnaire that will help to shed light on and answer one or more research questions.

It is also possible to discern in this book methods of data collection that are less structured or, to put it another way, that are more unstructured. In Part Three in particular, research methods will be encountered that emphasize a more open-ended view of the research process, so that there is less restriction on the kinds of things that can be found out about. Research methods such as **participant observation** and **semi-structured interviewing** are used so that the researcher can keep more of an open mind about the contours of what he or she needs to know about, so that concepts and theories can emerge out of the data. This is the inductive approach to theorizing and conceptualization that was referred to above. Such research is usually still geared to answering research questions, but these are often expressed in a less explicit form than the research questions encountered in more structured research of the kind encountered in Research in focus 1.1. This can be seen by comparing the specificity of these research questions with those of a study of retired senior managers by Jones, Leontowitsch, and Higgs (2010):

Our aim was to explore the experiences of retirement, changes in lifestyle and social roles and the meanings associated with retirement amongst early retirees from higher management. Research questions included: to what extent do our respondents construct a new balance of activities? Do respondents construct new discourses of everyday life? Does the move by respondents into leisure retirement create new tensions in other parts of their lives? (Jones et al. 2010: 105)

These research questions derived in part from, and were illuminated by, the concept of the ‘quasi-subject’ in modern societies, whereby people ‘become authors of their own biographies—authors who have to continually construct identities and biographical narratives in order to give meaning to lives that are lived out in the face of uncertainty’ (Jones et al. 2010: 104). In order to explore the research questions, semi-structured interviews with twenty relevant retirees were undertaken. The interviews were designed ‘to encourage a conversation and to allow participants to give their own account of retirement’ (Jones et al. 2010: 108). This is a noticeably less

structured approach to the collection of data, which reflects the open-ended nature of the research questions.

The collection of data, then, can entail different sorts of approach in terms of how structured or open-ended the implementation of the methods are. An issue that arises in all research is that of *quality*. How do you do good research and how do you know it when you read it? The assessment of research quality is an issue that relates to all phases of the research process, but the quality of the data-collection procedures is bound to be a key concern. As we will see in several chapters, the assessment of quality has become a prominent issue among social research practitioners and also for policy-makers with an interest in academic research. It has become a much more significant topic since the first edition of this book was published in 2001. There are several reasons for the greater prominence of research quality assessment, some of which will be mentioned in later chapters. However, the key point to register for the time being is that, with the increased importance of research quality assessment, debates have arisen about issues such as whether there can be quality criteria that apply to all forms of research. As we will see, especially in Chapter 17, there has been a clear position among some methodologists that a ‘horses for courses’ approach is required whereby the application of quality criteria needs to take into account the kind of investigation to which they are being applied.

Data analysis

Data analysis is a stage that incorporates several elements. At the most obvious level, it might be taken to mean the application of statistical techniques to the data that have been collected. However, quite aside from the fact that by no means all data are amenable to quantitative data analysis and that, even when some data might be appropriate to such analysis, alternative approaches are sometimes taken, there are other things going on when data are being analysed. For a start, the raw data have to be *managed*. This means that the researcher has to check the data to establish whether there are any obvious flaws. For example, if we take the kind of research like that conducted by Jones et al. (2010) on senior management early retirees, the interviews are usually audio-recorded and then subsequently transcribed. The researcher needs to be alert to possible hearing mistakes that might affect the meaning of people’s replies. The preparation of the data for **transcription** enables the researcher to introduce the transcripts into a computer software program of the kind discussed in Chapter 25. In the case of the research by Jones et al., once the transcripts

had been incorporated within the software, the authors say they conducted a **thematic analysis**. This means that they examined the data to extract core themes that could be distinguished both between and within transcripts. One of the main elements of the identification of themes was through **coding** each transcript. With the analysis of qualitative data of these kinds, coding is a process whereby the data are broken down into their component parts and those parts are then given labels. The analyst then searches for recurrences of these sequences of coded **text** within and across cases and also for links between different **codes**. Thus, there is a lot going on in this process: the data are being managed, in that the transcripts are being made more manageable than they would be if the researcher just kept listening and relistening to the recordings; the researcher is making sense of the data through coding the transcripts; and the data are being interpreted—that is, the researcher is seeking to link the process of making sense of the data with the research questions that provided the starting point, as well as with the literature relating to retirement and also with the theoretical ideas the authors use to illuminate the issue.

The data analysis stage is fundamentally about *data reduction*—that is, it is concerned with reducing the large corpus of information that the researcher has gathered so that he or she can make sense of it. Unless the researcher reduces the amount of data collected—for example, in the case of quantitative data by producing tables or averages and in the case of qualitative data by grouping textual material into categories like themes—it is more or less impossible to interpret the material.

A further issue to bear in mind with data analysis is that it can refer to the analysis of either primary or secondary data. With primary data analysis, the researcher or researchers who were responsible for collecting the data conduct the analysis, as was the case with both the Zimdars et al. (2009) and Jones et al. (2010) studies referred to in this chapter. Secondary data analysis occurs when someone else analyses such data. Nowadays, researchers who work in universities are encouraged to deposit their data in archives, which then allow others to analyse the data they collected. Given the time and cost of most social research, this is a sensible thing to do, as it increases the likely payoff of an investigation, and it may be that a researcher conducting secondary analysis can explore the research questions in which he or she is interested without having to go through the time-consuming and lengthy process of having to collect primary data. **Secondary analysis** is discussed in Chapters 14 and 24. However, the distinction between primary and secondary

analysis is not a perfect one. In Key concept 14.1, I present an example of a secondary analysis of data in which I was involved. For me, it was a primary analysis of the data, as I had not been involved in the data collection, whereas for my co-authors, all of whom had been involved in the data collection, it was a secondary analysis.

Writing up

It could be argued that the finest piece of research would be useless if it was not disseminated to others. We do research so that it can be written up, thereby allowing others to read what we have done and concluded.

Table 1.1

Stages in the research process in relation to two studies

Stage	Description of stage	Example (Zimdars et al. 2009)*	Example (Jones et al. 2010)
Literature review	A critical examination of existing research relating to the phenomena of interest and of relevant theoretical ideas.	Literature concerning social stratification as it relates to educational access and concerning the notion of cultural capital.	Literature concerning retirement and the notion of the 'quasi-subject' in second modernity.
Concepts and theories	The ideas that drive the research process and that shed light on the interpretation of the resulting findings. These findings contribute to the ideas.	Academic attainment; cultural capital; social background.	Early retirement; quasi-subject; discourse; lifestyle.
Research questions	A question that provides an explicit statement of what it is the researcher wants to know about.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do Oxford applicants vary in their cultural participation and cultural knowledge, according to parents' education, social class, gender and ethnicity? 2. Does cultural capital predict acceptance to Oxford? 3. If so, does its effect remain once we control for examination performance? 4. Is cultural capital more important for admission to the arts and humanities faculties than to the sciences? 5. To what extent does cultural capital mediate the effect of social class, parents' education, private schooling, ethnicity and gender? (Zimdars et al. 2009: 653) 	'to what extent do our respondents construct a new balance of activities? Do respondents construct new discourses of everyday life? Does the move by respondents into leisure retirement create new tensions in other parts of their lives?' (Jones et al. 2010: 105)
Sampling cases	The selection of cases (in this case people) who are relevant to the research questions.	'A representative sample of 1,700 applicants with British qualifications who applied to Oxford during the 2002 admissions cycle' (Zimdars et al. 2009: 653).	Sample of twenty early retirees obtained initially through databases of organizations working with retired people.
Data collection	Gathering data from the sample so that the research questions can be answered.	Questionnaire survey. Data obtained on degree attainment of each applicant. Also, interviews with admissions tutors and observation of admissions meetings.	Semi-structured interviews.
Data analysis	The management, analysis, and interpretation of the data.	Statistical analysis of the questionnaire data. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts.	Thematic analysis of interview transcripts.
Writing up	Dissemination of the research and its findings.	The research was written up as a doctoral thesis and as articles, including Zimdars et al. (2009). Main sections in Zimdars et al. (2009): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Operationalization • Research questions • Data and methods • Discussion • Appendix 	Research written up as an article in Jones et al. (2010). Main sections: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Background • Methods • Findings • Discussion • Conclusion

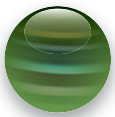
* Zimdars (2007) consulted for further information.

It might also be argued that writing up should not be part of the subject matter for a book on social research methods. However, since dissemination is so important to the researcher, it is right for it to be included, and the final chapter of this book (Chapter 29) is devoted to this issue.

There are slightly different ways in which social research tends to get written up, and these vary somewhat according to the different styles of doing research. For example, more structured kinds of research like that presented in Research in focus 1.1 are sometimes written up differently from more open-ended research of the sort represented by the Jones et al. (2010) article. However, there are some core ingredients that most dissertations, theses, and research articles will include. These are:

- *Introduction*. Here the research area and its significance are outlined. The research questions are also likely to be introduced here.
- *Literature review*. What is already known about the research area is sketched out and examined critically.
- *Research methods*. Here the research methods employed (sampling, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis) are presented and justified.
- *Results*. The findings are presented.
- *Discussion*. The findings are discussed in relation to their implications for the literature and for the research questions previously introduced.
- *Conclusion*. The significance of the research is reinforced for the reader.

These elements are discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 29. They are not an exhaustive list, because writing conventions differ in various ways, but these are recurring elements of the final written outputs. Table 1.1 summarizes the seven elements of the research process examined in this section.



The messiness of social research

There is one final point I want to register before you read further. It is to alert you to the fact that social research is often a lot less smooth than the accounts of the research process you read in books like this. The purpose of this book is to provide an overview of the research process that also provides advice on how it should be done. In fact, research is full of false starts, blind alleys, mistakes, and enforced changes to research plans. However, in a book like this it is impossible to cover all such contingencies, in large part because many of them are one-off events and almost impossible to anticipate. We know that research can get messy from the confessional accounts of the research process that have been written over the years (e.g. the contributors to P. Hammond 1964; Bell and Newby 1977; Bryman 1988b; Townsend and Burgess 2009a; Streiner and Sidani 2010). If social research is messy, why do we invariably not get a sense of that when we read reports of research in books and academic journal articles? Of course, research often does go relatively smoothly and, in spite of minor hiccoughs, proceeds roughly according to plan. However, it is also the case that what we read in reports of research are often relatively sanitized accounts of how the research was produced, without a sense of the sometimes difficult problems the researcher(s) had to overcome. This is not to say that when social researchers write accounts of

their studies they deceive us, but rather that the accounts of the findings and how they were arrived at tend to follow an implicit template that emphasizes some aspects of the research process but not others. They tend to emphasize how the specific findings presented in the report were arrived at and to use standard methodological terminology of the kind presented in this book to express the underlying process. Research reports typically display the various elements discussed in the previous section—the relevant literature is reviewed, the key concepts and theories are discussed, the research questions are presented, the sampling procedures and methods of data collection are explained and justified, the findings are presented and discussed, and some conclusions are drawn. The vicissitudes of research tend not to feature within this template. This tendency is not unique to social research: in Chapter 22 a study of how scientists present and discuss their work will be presented, and this shows that here too certain core aspects of the production of ‘findings’ tend to be omitted from the written account (Gilbert and Mulkey 1984).

It is also the case that, regardless of the various ways in which research can be knocked off its path, this book can deal only with generalities. It cannot cover every eventuality, so that it is quite possible that when conducting an investigation you will find that these generalities

do not fit perfectly with the circumstances in which you find yourself. It is important to be aware of that possibility and not to interpret any slight departures you have to make from the advice provided in this book as a problem with your skills and understanding. It could even be argued that, in the light of the different ways in which social researchers can be stymied in their research plans, a book on research methods, outlining how research is and should be conducted, is of little value. Needless to say, I would not subscribe to such a view. Many years ago, I was involved in several studies of construction projects. One of the recurring themes in the findings was the different ways that construction projects could be knocked off their course: unpredictable weather, sudden shortages of key supplies, illness, accidents, previously reliable sub-contractors letting the project manager down, clients changing their minds or being unavailable at key points, sudden changes in health and safety regulation, poor quality supplies, poor quality work, early excavation

revealing unanticipated problems—any of these could produce significant interruptions to even the best-planned construction project. But never was it suggested that the principles of construction and of construction management should be abandoned. Without such principles, project managers would be at an even greater loss to know how to proceed. Much the same is true of research projects. There are plenty of things that can go wrong. As Townsend and Burgess (2009b) write in the introduction to their collection of ‘research stories you won’t read in textbooks’, two of the recurring themes from the accounts they collected are the need for flexibility and the need for perseverance. However, at the same time it is crucial to have an appreciation of the methodological principles and the many debates and controversies that surround them, and these are outlined in the next twenty-eight chapters. These principles provide a road map for the journey ahead.



Key points

- Social research and social research methods are embedded in wider contextual factors. They are not practised in a vacuum.
- Social research practice comprises elements that are common to all or at least most forms of social research. These include: conducting a literature review; concepts and theories; research questions; sampling of cases; data collection; data analysis; and a writing-up of the research finding.
- Attention to these steps is what distinguishes academic social research from other kinds of social research.
- Although we can attempt to formulate general principles for conducting social research, we have to recognize that things do not always go entirely to plan.



Questions for review

What is meant by ‘social research’?

- What is distinctive about academic social research?

Why do social research?

- If you were about to embark on a research project now or in the near future, what would be the focus of it and why?

The context of social research methods

- What are the main factors that impinge on social research and the implementation of social research methods identified in the chapter? Can you think of any that have not been touched on?

Elements of the process of social research

- Why is a literature review important when conducting research?
- What role do concepts and theories play in the process of doing social research?
- Why are researchers encouraged to specify their research questions? What kinds of research questions are there?
- Why do researchers need to sample? Why is it important for them to outline the principles that underpin their sampling choices?
- Outline one or two factors that might affect a researcher's choice of data-collection instrument.
- What are the main differences between the kinds of data analysed by Zimdars et al. (2009) and Jones et al. (2010)?
- How might you structure the report of the findings of a project that you conducted?

The messiness of social research

- If research does not always go according to plan, why should we bother with methodological principles at all?



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Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of social research strategies. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.