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Ways of Knowing, Ways of Seeing

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. (Berger, 1972: 7–8)

Different people do research in different ways. This leads to fierce arguments. I want to avoid suggesting that there is a single right way to do research, and instead provide the means by which researchers can decide for themselves how best to proceed in order to resolve the challenge they have set themselves. Continually improving research practice gives confidence in the quality of the findings. This chapter will address:

- formulating a do-able research challenge and refining a manageable set of questions
- the range of techniques available in the researcher's armoury
- rehearsing arguments and posing questions
- the rationales and remits that establish the point of the research
- research design – from case study to controlled experiments
- the process of doing research.

As I pointed out in the opening chapter, some people have very definite views about *the* way to do research. Having followed many different approaches and used many different techniques, I just do not see the world like that. Everything has to flow from what you decide you need to know. The relationship between the research question, the data needs and the techniques is crucial, and one research style should not be expected to suit all occasions.

Getting Your Research Underway

People often find identifying a suitable research challenge extremely difficult. Some people choose to do an extended literature review. This is not the easy option many imagine it to be because a descriptive account is not acceptable. This route requires considerable powers of synthesis and analysis, and being comfortable with sophisticated theory is a prerequisite. Consequently most students choose to incorporate some empirical component to gather their own data – that at least gives a story to tell.

You should not assume that all research has to be grand or abstract; indeed, for your purposes it is better for it not to be. Equally, you should not undervalue your own interests. So if you have been involved in stamp collecting, Civil War re-enactments or your idol's fan club since the age of 8, why not try to work out how that can be related to ideas addressed on the course? But beware; simply having been mad about football since before you could walk is not enough to provide the rationale for the research. There needs to be something that suggests intellectual inquiry, the wanting to know bit. While university supervisors may emphasise the links to theory, employers may emphasise the link to policy. This may affect the shape of the research itself or the nature of the reporting.

What interests you?
What have others done?

Just jot down any ideas that come into your head. What is it that intrigues you about your area of interest? You cannot just stop there. There then has to be some process of refinement and you have to be convinced that what you are proposing is worth knowing.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- How does my chosen topic relate to the subject matter of the course? If you are doing the research as part of your job, you need to be clear how it will relate to the goals of your department/organisation.
- Do I have the resources to do it (time, money, contacts, means of travel, etc.)?
- Do I have the knowledge and skills to do it? If not, how can I acquire them?

Identifying a Dissertation Challenge

Most dissertations can be seen to address one of just a handful of different kinds of challenge (by all means try to identify more).

(Continued)

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(Continued)

Filling in gaps

(Be careful that the gap you identify is a real one and there isn't already a body of work addressing just that.)

e.g., *We know _____ about the relationships between work and leisure, but not the reactions of the worker's family. So _____*

or, *Belt and Braces gathered a large amount of data about the relationship between different types of leisure and health. However, in their preoccupation with physical fitness they overlooked the data they had on mental wellbeing. I intend to analyse this to _____.*

Changes over time

e.g., *20 years ago Long found that leisure activities in retirement were essentially the same as before retirement. Since then _____ changes have occurred, so I shall repeat the earlier study to find out if the same pattern persists.*

or, *Does the trail of abandoned cinemas / bowling greens / tennis courts in Birmingham tell us more about shifts in population or shifts in fashion?*

Evaluation of an initiative

e.g., *Midtown Library Service will be running a read-a-book scheme. I shall monitor its progress and evaluate its success in changing reading patterns among people from different educational backgrounds.*

Cross-cultural comparisons

e.g., *Crompton found this in the US, but Britain is different because _____, so can we expect the same to apply here?*

Applying someone's theory to new circumstances

e.g., *Bourdieu's ideas of 'cultural capital' have rarely been applied to aspects of working class culture. I intend to explore whether the same frameworks can be applied in the arena of gambling, and try to work out the implications for the industry.*

Contrasting the explanations different theories offer for the same phenomenon (and exploring the consequences for practice)

e.g., *I shall examine the evidence for feminist and anthropological explanations of group behaviour in city centres, and explore the likely effectiveness of alternative methods of control within each of these frameworks.*

Applying someone's model

e.g., *Slack has proposed that the best way for a company to address organisational change is _____. I shall examine how closely Bettalezya followed this process, how issues were dealt with and with what success.*

Research Techniques

It seems commonplace for people approaching social research for the first time to take for granted that they will be doing a questionnaire. There are many good reasons for using social surveys, but there should be no presumption that this should be the approach of choice. Later chapters introduce alternatives, but there are many more.

My apparently trivial example in the previous chapter of feeling '77 bad today' is the kind of issue that underlies discussions about how we find out about the world and what passes for knowledge. Accurate measurement allows comparison. Can we measure the kinds of thing we talk about in the social sciences? Some choose their research techniques in the firm belief that it is vital that we should find a way of doing so; others are equally convinced that such precision is an illusion and a distraction from finding out how social processes operate.

Exercise

It is not unusual to hear professionals and policymakers arguing that leisure enhances quality of life (or promotes social inclusion or aids neighbourhood renewal). This is normally a statement of belief rather than something for which they have any evidence. So if you were set the challenge of trying to do some research that would help address whether or not that kind of claim is justified, where would you start?

Some important principles:

1. *Define your terms* – It is important to be clear and precise about what you are investigating.
 - What is meant by 'quality of life'?
 - Is leisure more than just sport?
2. *Narrow the focus* – You would be well advised not even to think about trying to address the question as a whole. Instead, choose a manageable chunk. So you might decide to examine whether those involved in a wider variety of leisure pursuits report a higher level of life satisfaction. Is 'variety' the most important consideration?
3. *Decide what evidence you will need* – How would you measure variety of leisure pursuits and life satisfaction? Do you need a quantitative measure or is this an occasion when qualitative data would tell you more?
4. *Question the (potential) findings* – If we find a relationship does that imply we know what causes improvements in the quality of life? Suppose that those involved in a wider variety of leisure pursuits did in fact report a higher level of life satisfaction, maybe they are able to take part in this variety of leisure because they have a higher income and it is this higher income that is determining their satisfaction with life.

Research Design

I mentioned in the opening chapter that many social researchers have been bewitched by the scientific method, so I shall take as my starting point here the basics of the *experimental* method which tries to establish causal relationships through examining whether a change in one thing leads to a change in another. In its simplest form:

- Step 1 Hypothesise some relationship between a causal variable (the independent variable, conventionally labelled X) and some form of performance (the dependent variable, conventionally labelled Y) [e.g. 'increased stamina improves performance' or, in the previous example, 'a wider variety of leisure activities leads to higher levels of life satisfaction'].
- Step 2 Randomly allocate people to two groups.
- Step 3 For both groups, measure the key variable you are interested in [e.g., stamina or number of leisure activities and indicator of performance or life satisfaction]
- Step 4 Give some treatment to one group (the treatment group) but not the other (the control group) and keep all other conditions the same. [The treatment might be in the form of nutritional supplements, a training programme, classes at the leisure centre or anything that is hypothesised to bring about change.]
- Step 5 Repeat the measurement of Step 2.

If some change has been recorded in the treatment group and not in the control group, the cause of the change is attributed to the treatment, as long as nothing else has been changed.

Researchers gradually became aware of various limitations in this approach, and devised more sophisticated designs to try to address those shortcomings.¹ Although sport psychologists often try to replicate the conditions of experimental design, elsewhere in our field of leisure, sport and tourism it is not common. The problem is that in social research it is rarely possible to conduct even the basic experimental design. Instead the research designs are usually less structured, and as a consequence it may not be possible to say confidently that one thing causes another.

Consider, for example, an area of considerable contemporary interest – whether sport, the arts, outdoor adventure or other leisure pursuits can be used to divert people

¹For example, it was realised that some people may have been affected simply because they were being 'treated', independent of the 'treatment' itself, ie they were responding to something being done or someone taking an interest in them. To counteract this a group was included in the research design that received a placebo, something which of itself should have no impact on the outcome.

from crime. Quite apart from problems of measuring sport/arts/adventure and crime, the chances are it is not possible to allocate people randomly to treatment and control groups. It may not even be desirable, never mind possible, to administer the same dose of sport to each person in the control trial; it is impossible to hold the other aspects of people's lives constant, and other than in exceptional circumstances you can hardly prohibit those in the control group from taking part in sport. Nonetheless people do try to put together experiment-like research designs to meet such research challenges, and you can try to work out what that might look like in these circumstances. Experimental design is not foolproof though. It cannot protect against a wrongly formulated model. A researcher may think they have established that involvement in sport has turned people away from crime, but the key variable may have been the charisma of the person running the project or the social contact provided by the sessions rather than the activity itself.

Elsewhere the research design problems may be less complex. We may, for example, be interested in how to reduce the amount of litter left at picnic sites in national parks. Assuming we can devise a good measure of the amount of littering that can be administered at different points in time, part way through that sequence we might remove all litter bins from picnic sites in one park (in the belief that people will then take their litter home), mount an anti-litter media campaign in the catchment area of another and leave things unaltered in a third. The consequences can then be carefully tracked in each park, though of course the visitors have not been randomly allocated to the three parks. Alternatively, we may be more interested in why littering occurs and in what circumstances.

Working with a single group receiving the 'treatment', conducting repeat measures (or soundings) still represents a **longitudinal** study. Returning to our sport and crime example, researchers might gather data at the start of a project (or even before) and again some time into the project or at its end. This might be with the same individuals on both occasions, a panel (e.g. the young people on the programme), or with different people drawn from the same population (e.g. for community perceptions of violence/crime). Although this lacks the random allocation to treatment and control groups, the interest is still with change over time.

However, the majority of small scale studies in social research are either **cross-sectional studies** or one-off **case studies** conducted in one place at a single point in time (snap shots).

A **cross-sectional study** might involve a community survey to establish people's views on how threats to safety limit their leisure choices; or it might be a survey of those in a young offenders' institution to identify their characteristics, how they got involved in crime and their attitudes towards crime and corrective practices. What

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happens then is that the researcher searches for how different groups vary in their attitudes or behaviour. This might mean seeing if there is any difference in the way in which fear of crime varies according to age, gender, how long people have been resident in the area, whether or not they have been the victims of crime or whether there is a diversionary project running in their area. In such circumstances attempts to establish causal relationships come not through allocating people randomly to groups as above, but through statistical procedures to 'control' the effect of different variables to try and identify whether, for example, committing crime can be attributed to educational experience, peers, parental influence or (lack of) involvement in sport.

Continuing with our example, a **case study** might involve examining the success of a project that has been set up among young people considered to be 'at risk' with a view to diverting them from crime. While this might not produce 'hard' data to prove a link between participation in the project and deviant behaviour, it might be possible to identify participants' interpretations of what causes them to engage or not engage in such behaviour and whether they think leisure activities play any part in that. Typically a case study would not be concerned only with those receiving the 'treatment', but all the players in the game (e.g., policymakers, project workers, local residents) as well as the structures and operations of the project.

Of course, anything observed in that case study may be peculiar to that place/project. The research design might therefore be strengthened by examining two or more projects to introduce a *comparative* dimension. It is, of course, possible to introduce a comparative dimension *within* a case study to provide a focus for interpretation and analysis. This might involve comparing how males and females react to the demands and opportunities of the programme. Comparative studies may be either cross-sectional or longitudinal.

Your interest may instead be in the use of libraries or allotments as a leisure resource or the phenomenon of Disney Land/World. It should be fairly straightforward to identify the same kinds of research design that might be put into operation in that context (see also Chapter 16 on writing a research proposal). Whatever the design, researchers should always go looking for alternative explanations and never believe their own publicity. Others will certainly be asking questions about whether or not the research really addresses the issues it claims to (the validity of the measures involved), whether the logic of the argument justifies the conclusions (commonly referred to as **internal validity**), and how generalisable the findings are to other circumstances (commonly referred to as **external validity**). Most researchers share these concerns, but those who prefer a more qualitative approach may talk about them in a different way (Chapter 15).

Mixed Method and Triangulation

In scientific research researchers are expected to test the reliability, validity and generality of findings. In social science we cannot expect to know things precisely, but the more times we examine something in different ways the more we increase our chances of understanding what we are studying. The term most commonly associated with this in the research literature is 'triangulation'.² This is all about taking different fixes, different bearings on the phenomenon under investigation, from different perspectives. These alternative 'takes' can come in several forms, through:

- *Data* – Staying with the theme introduced above, imagine a scenario in which some children are playing in a newly provided adventure play area when a group of slightly older children turns up; apart from one, the younger children soon leave; Later a fire breaks out at the play area. The researcher may compare accounts given by different youngsters, then draw in the interpretations of the youth worker and local police officer and compare all those accounts with CCTV footage.
- *Methodologies* – It is not hard to imagine different styles of research in similar circumstances that use personality profiling, observation, interviews or video diaries, so more than one of these might be combined within a single study to gather different kinds of information.
- *Theories* – Different insights might be provided by applying different theories to analyse and interpret the data being collected (in this case we might use theories of personality, territory or gender, for example).
- *Researchers* – Presented with the same data different researchers may offer different interpretations because of their personal background, experience of similar events or academic training.
- *Cases* – scientific replication may not be possible in the social sciences (we cannot treat 'the real world' as a laboratory in which everything is controlled), but we might still want to explore what element of replicability can be established in different circumstances – analogous to the comparative research design discussed earlier in this chapter.

²I'm not sure of the origins of the term. first came across it in Norman Denzin (1970) *The Research Act*

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If they come up with the same findings we start to have some confidence that maybe the suggested relationship really does exist. If they do not, it should suggest new ideas and theories to us.

The hope is that different lines of inquiry will be confirmatory, reinforcing each other and our confidence in our findings. However, in the face of the desire to arrive at *the* answer, one of the most important benefits of using multiple methods and different perspectives may be to reduce inappropriate certainty, to avoid us having blind faith in our findings and accepting an explanation that may not be warranted (Robson, 1993).

Although they are not quite the same, other writers use multi-method or multiple strategies to address similar ideas. You need to be clear about what you think each approach will contribute to your research, not use multiple methods just because you think it is 'the done thing'.

The Research Process

When I read about other people's research I am curious to know the story of the research, so I can work out how the conclusions have been arrived at. The research process is a complex mix of the methodical and the creative. One of my previous bosses was fond of describing it as 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration (he did not pretend that was original) in order to make sure I did not labour under any romantic notion that I could get away with not doing the hard graft. The research process associated with the scientific method introduced above might be summarised as being:

observation \Rightarrow formulate preliminary theory \Rightarrow devise testable hypothesis \Rightarrow collect data \Rightarrow conduct analysis to test hypothesis \Rightarrow confirm/revise theory.

Although it represents a model he was not particularly comfortable with Bulmer (1977: 6) identified an ideal-typical approach to social research that he likened to a military campaign:

design the research \Rightarrow select sampling procedures \Rightarrow construct a questionnaire \Rightarrow collect data \Rightarrow coding and analysis \Rightarrow interpretation and reporting.

Like many others, my experience of research in leisure, sport and tourism has been that the process is less straightforward than either of those suggests. In one of our research projects some time ago (Long et al., 1988) the process was more like that set out below.

The Research Process

1. Purpose
2. Audience
3. Focus
4. Questions (hypotheses)
5. Information Needs
6. Information Sources (+ negotiating access)
7. Methods
8. Time and Resources (how the practical constrains the desirable)
9. Procedures
(including sampling)
10. Data Gathering
(after pilot, pre-test or trial)
11. Data Preparation
(e.g. coding and data entry)
12. Analysis and Interpretation
13. Writing-up
14. Dissemination

N.B.

- (a) all stages are interlinked
- (b) think through all stages before starting
- (c) data gathering is Stage 10 not Stage 1
- (d) in practice the process is not as neat as this

That piece of research was done to inform the Local Education Authority's policy on community schooling, but to test the transferability of the process to other circumstances I have tried to work through how it might apply to someone doing their research on that ever popular topic of football hooliganism.

1. *Purpose* – This simply establishes a general starting point. For the current exercise we shall take this as being 'to explore the nature and consequences of football crowd behaviour'.
2. *Audience* – That starting point might suggest any number of possible research projects, and different groups/organisations will have different priorities and push the research in a particular direction. The Home Office might choose a different research project from the clubs, which might in turn differ from the interests of academics. Dissertation research may have to satisfy the demands of both tutors and people 'out there' who have agreed to co-operate in your research.

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3. *Focus* – The particular focus may be suggested by a review of the literature. So, for example, you may have identified that a major gap in the literature is the impact the behaviour of the fans has on local residents. The focus may also be suggested by related theories – theories of risk, territoriality, masculinity, the civilising process, cultural conflict...
4. *Questions* – Whatever the focus you choose it is likely to suggest a whole set of more precise questions that you might be interested in, for example:
 - How do the views of business owners and residents compare?
 - Is there a difference in the experiences of white and black residents?
 - Are arrests for incidents between fans, offences against other people or against property?
 - What is the reaction in those communities where the stadium has been relocated away so that it no longer affects them?

In scientific research such questions would be reformulated into hypotheses (and you may wish to follow that route), but in other styles of research in the social sciences such issues are simply used to give shape and direction to the research.

5. *Information Needs* – It is then necessary to identify what information is going to be needed. In this case we might need some record of offences or people's reactions/feelings.
6. *Information Sources* – The source of the relevant data has to be identified: the archives of the local newspaper, police/club records, police officers themselves, local residents, your own observations in the field. Check that these sources will actually produce the information you need. Check too that you can get access to them (negotiating access may be especially difficult for a student project).
7. *Methods/Techniques* – You might start out doing a statistical analysis of arrest data to try to identify trends, supplement that with individual or group interviews with officers so you can understand how the statistics relate to what happened on the day, and administer a questionnaire to local people to find out how people's attitudes vary.
8. *Time and Resources* – There never seems to be enough money or time, so the practical must constrain the desirable. Map out what can be done with the resources available or heartache will follow. Your friend in the statistics department may tell you that you need 1000 respondents, but if you are the only interviewer that is unlikely. Be realistic about what can be achieved so you don't bite off more than you can chew. On the other hand your tutor/boss is not going to be amused if they think you have been skiving and not doing much work.
9. *Procedures* – Think through what you are actually going to do and then run a pilot (trial run) to see if it works in practice. Where, when and how is it best to do the

research? How will you get there, how will the sample be selected and the data collected, what will you do if it rains?

10. *Data Gathering* – Only after all that has gone before are you able to collect your data.
11. *Data Preparation* – You have to get the data into shape so you can try and make sense of it. This often involves coding, whether the data are in the form of questionnaires, lengthy interviews, police reports or your field notes from attendance at matches. Quantitative data, and increasingly qualitative too, have to be entered into computer files.
12. *Analysis and Interpretation* – Pure description is rarely enough, even if you have managed to quantify some component of behaviour/outlook. Reporting that 27% of residents said something may be of some interest, but does not advance our understanding very far (especially if you have to add that they are only four people). So you might at least consider if there is a difference between male and female residents or the behaviour of fans of different ages. What can you say about why or how something happened? Importantly, you need to consider what implications your findings might have for theory, policy or practice.
13. *Writing-up* – I enjoy this, but only if there is enough time to do a good job. Don't underestimate how long this stage will take, especially as it is important to leave time for editing and proof-reading. It is important to take into consideration once again the audience (academics or professionals; councillors or officers; customers or Board members) and choose an appropriate style.
14. *Dissemination* – Having spent a lot of time doing the research it seems only sensible to make sure that the findings get noticed by as many people as possible.

Four important points should be noted from this.

- (i) The research process is normally far messier than a model like this might imply. By the time the report gets written, it has been tidied-up ... and you don't want to know about the mistakes.
- (ii) The different stages are interlinked and, typically, one stage overlaps with another.
- (iii) Data collection is only stage 10 in this process. Which particular stage it is matters less than an appreciation that data gathering is not the first step in the research process. A lot needs to happen before that. To coin a popular aphorism, 'prior preparation prevents piss poor performance'.
- (iv) Of course things will change, but it is important to think through all the stages before setting out.

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Identify area of research interest ... review ... focus ... and then ask yourself:		
What questions am I interested in?	What information do I need to be able to answer those questions?	How will I get it?

Figure 2.1 Research Planning

It is good practice to get into the habit of keeping a research diary, noting what decisions have been taken, what has happened to you, your reactions to what you have seen or been told. It is also important to engage in conversations with yourself, asking questions about how the research is being conducted and your own role in that,³ and possible interpretations of what you have seen and heard.

Research Planning

While you are just talking about the research it is easy to bluster – many of us have become quite practised at that – so it is a good idea to find an alternative way of representing the research. Try drawing a diagrammatic representation of what it is about with boxes and arrows to show the imagined relationships. Having refined the nature of the research challenge it is also important to clarify the data requirements. Completing a simple table like that in Figure 2.1 will help here. For each of the research questions you want to address (sub-divide these as much as possible), record the information you will need if you are to say anything sensible about your chosen topic, and then identify where that is going to come from.

When working on an extended research project it is important to have a route map that charts the expected journey through the process. This often takes the form of a timeline, setting out key stages, milestones and thresholds. In any project some things

³Much has been written in recent years about 'the reflexive researcher', which is concerned with the impact researchers have on the world around them and upon the findings of the research, because of their own experience, their understanding of how the world operates and their impact on others.

cannot be done until other stages have been completed. A good project plan containing a timeline should make sure that the necessary building blocks are in place at the right time – make sure that important stages like negotiating access/approval are not left out. For all my insistence that the preparatory stages are important, it is vital that you press on at this stage and don't procrastinate. Data collection, analysis and writing all need substantial blocks of time and should not be squeezed so that corners have to be cut. The schedule needs to have enough flexibility to allow time to recover from a computer virus or the Managing Director taking a week longer than expected to grant permission for interviews with the firm's employees. This exercise also helps to maintain momentum through the course of the project, offering a way of monitoring progress and providing reminders.

Those involved in sport may be familiar with ideas of 'the inner game' or mental rehearsal. It is useful to apply the same principles here. Project yourself into the future and imagine you are actually doing each step of the research. If you can do this well it will cut out some avoidable mistakes.

Exercise

Many of these ideas seem very abstract and hard to relate to when talked about in these terms. Find an article that you like in one of the academic journals and then try to work out:

- How has the research problem been formulated?
- What are the key issues and variables under consideration?
- How did the researcher(s) understand/measure these? [It is hard enough to measure, examine or assess something like income never mind more complex ideas like social class or power.]
- What was the basic structure of the research design – experimental, longitudinal, cross-sectional, case study, comparative?

Ask these same questions of your proposed research.

Further Lines of Enquiry

For those working in more scientific parts of the leisure, sport and tourism area, a useful introduction to the idea of experimental research design can be found in Thomas and Nelson (2001) *Research Methods in Physical Activity*. In the context of social research, try de Vaus's (2002) book *Surveys in Social Research*. For anyone wanting to explore these issues in more detail de Vaus (2001) has devoted a complete book to the examination of research design, in which he presents design as the logical structure of enquiry.