

# PART I

## RESEARCH COMMUNITIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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### Key features of research in the social sciences

*Bridget Somekh*

Research in the social sciences draws on various long-established traditions. Its origins might, for example, be said to lie with the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who developed ways of conceptualizing and categorizing knowledge, truth and human experience during the fourth century BC. Fundamentally, social science research is concerned with people and their life contexts, and with philosophical questions relating to the nature of knowledge and truth (epistemology), values (axiology) and being (ontology) which underpin human judgements and activities.

Empirical social science research – that is research which involves the collection of data about people and their social contexts by a range of methods – draws heavily upon the traditions and practices of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and creative arts. Anthropology contributes a tradition of participant observation and interviews, field note-taking and heuristic interpretation of culture. For example, from Geertz we learn the importance of reading the cultural meanings in details of behaviour such as winks, and writing about research using ‘thick description’ to give readers the experience of ‘being there’ (Geertz, 1973). From sociology, we learn how social relations are formed and reproduced. Psychology provides us with an understanding of human behaviour. History contributes a tradition of document analysis (the weighing of evidence in the light of the likely biases of the informant) and accords importance to contemporary records, including personal testimony in letters and note books. The creative arts contribute a tradition of aesthetics (discernment and judgement of worth) and accord importance to creativity and imagination in

interpretation. The notion of the social scientist creating knowledge by bringing vision to the interpretation of facts was central to the work of Mills (1959) and more recently researchers such as Eisner (1991) have emphasized the importance of the social scientist as connoisseur.

As a recognized and codified practice, however, social science research has its origins in the emergence of the nation-state with its political demands for the classification and analysis of individuals and populations. Anthropology, for example, emerged in the service of colonialism. The very term social science indicates its emergence in relation to, sometimes in opposition to, natural science. Early twentieth-century social scientists struggled to extricate themselves from the accusations made by logical positivism that research which lacked the solid foundation of measurement was no better than fancy and invention. They sought to develop methods which conformed to the methodology of the natural sciences, and researchers such as George Homans ('general theory') and Kurt Lewin ('force field theory') focused on seeking generalizable laws governing the behaviour of human groups. Today the historical shaping of social science research in a struggle to be 'other' than, but equivalent to, natural science research lingers in the imagination of the public, politicians and policy-makers. There remains a political dimension to being a social science researcher, pursuing knowledge and understanding of individuals, social groups and organizations, in a world where status is not accorded equally to different research methodologies. There has also been a considerable amount of debate about the uses of social scientific knowledge, and how it could be and should be applied to both control and modify people's behaviour. The questions about ethical limits to the application of social scientific knowledge have been widely debated.

This political dimension has led researchers to develop elaborate methodological fortresses in which particular understandings of knowledge, truth, values and being give firm foundations for research design and provide defensive bulwarks against external criticism (including criticism from other academics). Often called 'paradigms', following Thomas Kuhn's (1970) influential work, these ways of seeing the world provide security in what Foucault (1972: 131) called a 'regime of truth' or set of values and beliefs expressed in a discourse that maps out what can – and cannot – be said. Specific aspects of the paradigm are, of course, continuously under debate, rather in the manner of small building work to improve the

defensibility of a fortress. While paradigms provide important frameworks of ideas for thinking about research methodology, their development has had the unfortunate effect of polarizing social science researchers. There is a tendency for oppositional groups to belittle the work of the others, often by means of attaching grossly simplified (and therefore meaningless) epithets to their work such as 'positivist' (for quantitative and statistical methods) and 'subjective' (for interpretive methods).

In recent years, there have also been attempts to think about social sciences not only in their local and national frames, but also in global ones. It has been argued, for example, that disciplines of the social science emerged to serve nation-building projects, and that globalization has raised new questions about the nature of identity, culture and social relations as well as power configurations. Following both large-scale movement of people across the globe and the recognition of global interrelations, the issues of difference have come to occupy a central place within the social sciences, not only in anthropology and sociology but also in other disciplinary and policy fields. The issues of postcoloniality in a globalizing world raise a whole range of questions that can no longer be ignored. Thus, for example, theorists have begun to speak of a global rather than a national sociology (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000). This has affected the nature and scope of research methodologies and methods. It may have even pushed social scientists towards more interdisciplinary work, something that was long resisted by them.

In this book, the full spectrum of research methods of social science are presented rather than drawing on any particular paradigm. While it is recognized that some methodological frameworks are incompatible with others, the overarching premise of the book is to indicate how a wide range of researchers choose a methodology and methods which are appropriate to both the area of enquiry and their own way of seeing the world. Readers are invited to explore the ideas in these chapters, seeking to learn with an open mind, and revisit and challenge previously held assumptions. Ideal researchers are perhaps, in the words of one of the founders of scientific method:

Mindes, that have not suffered themselves to fixe,  
but have kept themselves open and prepared to  
receive continual Amendment, which is exceeding  
Rare. (Francis Bacon, 1597, 'On Custome and  
Education').

Social science research differs from research in the natural sciences as a result of its focus on people – individuals and groups – and their behaviour within cultures and organizations that vary widely socially and historically. There is an unpredictability in the behaviour of human beings. Medical research is able to use probability theories to develop therapeutic drugs because bodily systems function relatively autonomously from the mind (though even this idea is undergoing change). Social science research cannot develop similarly powerful solutions to social problems since the mind enables individuals and groups to take decisions that vary with widely different motives. Human experience is characterized by complexity, and social science researchers need to resist the temptation to impose unwarranted order through the application of ‘one size fits all’ theories.

Specialist branches of the social sciences, such as psychology and sociology, provide a bedrock of concepts and theories for the study of people, available to those working in more applied fields such as education, health sciences, social work and business administration. For example, in anthropology Benedict (1935: 161–201) explores the way in which individuals are shaped by their society, while at the same time reconstructing and shaping society itself. In cultural psychology, Wertsch (1998) builds on the work of Vygotsky to explore the ways human activity is ‘mediated’ by cultural tools and artefacts so that human agency is constantly enabled or constrained by cultural and current contexts. In the history and philosophy of science, Haraway (1992: 10–13) analyses how primatology has been studied and interpreted by ‘the interacting dualisms, sex/gender and nature/culture’ and how the underlying assumption in both biology and anthropology that ‘sex and the west are axiomatic’ led to a construction of western primatology as ‘simian orientalism’, in which primates are cast by scientists as eastern-exotic/‘primitive’ alter egos.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century social science research methods diversified considerably, thanks largely to the influence of feminist theories that challenged many assumptions – such as the personal/political dichotomy – on the grounds that they derived from masculine hegemonies. Feminist research ‘puts social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry’ (Lather, 1991: 71), reconstructing the process of research at all levels from the chosen focus of study to relationships with participants, methods of data collection, choice of analytical

concepts and approaches to reporting. An important feature of this work has been the rediscovery of women social scientists from earlier generations and reinstatement of their work (Delamont, 2003: 78–95).

Quality in social science research rests upon the persuasive power of its outcomes and therefore, fundamentally, upon how it uses language to construct and represent meaning. Recently, postmodernism and deconstruction have challenged the whole idea that social science research should generate coherent meaning, accusing researchers of imposing an unwarranted order on data in order to present an – often formulaic – ‘grand narrative’. Haraway (1991: 187) makes explicit the dilemmas that face social science researchers as a result of the new epistemologies arising from feminism and deconstruction, arguing that we need ‘*simultaneously* [...] a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world.’

As a result of its focus on people, ethical issues are centrally important in social science research. Knowledge confers power, so in collecting data researchers need to be guided by principles of respect for persons and obtaining informed consent. The publication of outcomes confronts social science researchers with the need to consider the possible impact of their reports on the people who have been part of it. Standard procedures such as ‘anonymizing’ participants and organizations raise further ethical questions since people’s ideas can be seen as their intellectual property and in some cases it would certainly be unethical to quote them without also accrediting the source.

Springing from moral and ethical principles, social science researchers vary considerably in terms of the kinds of relationship they establish with participants, as indicated by the terms they use to describe them. Some adopt the stance of an outsider carrying out research on ‘subjects’; some adopt the stance of a participant carrying out research in close contact with ‘informants’; some adopt the stance of a partner, carrying out research with ‘co-researchers’; some adopt the stance of facilitators, inviting ‘practitioner-researchers’ to carry out their own research rather than having research done for them by an ‘outsider’. These decisions all imply different ways of distributing power within the relationship, but whatever stance is adopted power differentials are never entirely within the researcher’s control and can never be excised. This in turn has an impact on the quality and

reliability of the data that can be collected. Social science researchers typically emphasize the need to establish a relationship of trust with the participants as the necessary condition for carrying out high-quality research. However, since relationships are organic rather than static, trust is a slippery concept. Human beings (can) never reveal all that is in their minds and with this realization has come an increasing emphasis on the negotiation of the research contract, whether implicit or explicit.

Most people reading this book will be simultaneously embarking on their own research project, whether for a higher degree or as part of a research team in the workplace. So it is important to emphasize that all research involves a set of activities that take place over time and have to be planned in advance. Researchers require a whole host of life skills such as: personal time management; enlisting others to work with you; organizational skills to assemble data and arrange it for easy retrieval; fascination with detail during the phase of immersion in data; curiosity and creativity to notice the meaning and patterns that emerge from it; synthesizing ideas and constructing and testing out theories; reflexive self-awareness to explore your own impact on the material you are analysing; critical reasoning to evaluate your interpretations in relation to those of others; and presenting reports both in writing and orally which have sufficient persuasive power to command attention.

Social science research is an art as well as a science, and the skills and knowledge needed to be a researcher can only be acquired through experience over time. There are always judgements to be made and decisions to be taken about how best to go about research. Fundamental to the achievement of high quality is the preparedness and ability of social science researchers to critique their work and reflect on how it could have been done differently, and whether that might have changed the outcomes and, if so, how. Reflexivity, not recipes, is the hallmark of the good social science researcher.

## Principles of research in six social science disciplines

The rest of Part I, divided into six subsections, introduces the culture, values and politics that frame and influence research practice and underpinning methodologies within each of six disciplines of the social sciences. They are intended to illustrate the

processes of history and tradition by which research in each discipline is shaped. There are, of course, a large number of social science disciplines and it has not been possible to include all here. We have included first the two major underpinning disciplines, Psychology and Sociology, from which we believe that all other social sciences draw models and theories. These are followed by four disciplines, Education, Health, Social Policy, and Management and Business, which have been particularly strongly influenced by political fashions and ideologies in many countries during the last half century, and which are illustrative of the constraining and shaping processes of the sociology of knowledge. They have been chosen because of their fundamental importance in influencing social organization in a civil society. In choosing these six disciplines we have been influenced by the need to provide support and guidance for researchers working in fields in which the interrelationship between theory and practice is critically important, and where there is often a need for researchers to become involved in researching the process of innovation and development. Many other social science disciplines, for example Anthropology and Economics, could make a stronger claim than some of these for their significance and impact in the social sciences as a whole, and we have ensured that many chapters of the book draw upon them for inspiration.

### **Psychology**

*Erica Burman*

The origins of the modern psychology of western societies lie in the political demands of the nation-state ranging from how the introduction of compulsory primary-level schooling led to the ‘need’ to distinguish educational levels, to assessing the mental and physical ‘abilities’ of soldiers recruited for imperial wars. Hence notwithstanding its concern with the seemingly private or personal worlds of individual minds, family relationships and (usually small) group activity, psychology is far from being separate from broader social interests. The current popularity of psychology merely continues a long-standing strategy to shape appropriate forms of citizenship through interventions at the level of the individual.

Contemporary psychology has many subdisciplinary divisions: for example, developmental, social, cognitive, educational, clinical – and more recently forensic, health and community psychology. Some are

now accorded distinct professional status while others are considered more ‘academic’ specialisms. Most have been subject to shifting sets of methodological and theoretical paradigms: behaviourist, cognitive, humanist, deconstructionist. They all elaborate their own model of their subject as well as corresponding procedures for the investigation of its qualities.

Yet the early psychologists were both theoretical and applied in their concerns, and took an integrated approach to their investigations. Their methods combined observation, experimentation and interpretation. Notwithstanding the current focus of mainstream psychology on experimental techniques and statistical analyses, early key psychological studies were based on case studies with small sample sizes that were frequently accompanied by wide-ranging political, philosophical and social commentary and speculation.

Hence while psychology may have emerged to fulfil a political need for a science of the individual, its apparently specialist knowledge belies the ways it is imbued by its own cultural conditions. Its influence extends far beyond psychological ‘laboratories’ or elite academic settings. Psychological theories profoundly inflect a whole range of practices dealing with the assessment and evaluation of our lives: in schools, in work, in hospitals, in prisons – and even (or especially?) in our kitchens and bedrooms. Foucault (1981) aptly described psychoanalysis as a secular confessional and we increasingly look to psychological and psychotherapeutic ideas for advice. This ‘psy complex’ (Rose, 1985; Ingleby, 1985) invites us to construct a sense of interiority, or self-hood, through subscription to some – now secularized – authority. In this sense Foucault’s analyses are particularly relevant as psychology plays a key role in forms of self-regulation or ‘governmentality’ by which liberal democracies define and limit ‘normality’, alongside informing how we experience ourselves as freely choosing the norms we live with and by (Rose, 1985, 1990).

The history of psychology is not a pretty one. Cyril Burt was the first person in Britain to be officially employed as a ‘psychologist’ – by London County Council in 1913. Other early psychologists were explicit advocates of eugenics (Richards, 1997), and their legacies remain in the statistical tests they invented. Burt’s impact remains on the tripartite structure of the schooling system, as well as founding and editing the *British Journal of Statistical Psychology*. This is alongside having fabricated results (and research personnel) to support his claims of the

heritability of intelligence (Kamin, 1977). Despite repudiating his ‘data’, the discipline of psychology has continued to benefit from his achievement in inscribing its place within social policy. In this, claims to ‘science’ were part of a legitimization strategy to build a credible arena of theory and practice.

Thus far from being ‘scientific’, in the usually accepted sense of being value-free or neutral, psychological research has from its inception been imbued with distinct policy (and personal) agendas. Psychology is the reflexive discipline par excellence – since it is about people studying people. Addressing this has made psychology rather a self-preoccupied discipline, endlessly exploring the methodological artefacts of its own (sometimes rather bizarre) interventions. Much psychological literature discusses conceptual devices that have been elaborated to try to describe and then screen out researcher effects: documenting how research participants (or ‘subjects’) are sensitive to particular contextual conditions (such as primacy, recency or halo ‘effects’ and other demand and volunteer ‘characteristics’). These analyses remain relevant within quantitative psychology, particularly experimental or survey design.

From the late 1970s the turn to qualitative and interpretive approaches ushered in more participative and humanist psychological research, positioning those who are studied as active constructors and expert interpreters of their own psychologies. Feminist critiques imported an attention to the ways social structural differences – such as gender – enter into research relationships and to more subtle ways that gendered representations and assumptions structure theoretical and methodological paradigms. Rather than being something to be screened out in the pursuit of accurate measurement, subjectivity – whether of the researcher or the researched – emerges as vital to include and address in generating rigorous and relevant analyses.

Hence psychology poses starkly a key conundrum posed by power/knowledge relations within the social sciences. Is method theory? If it is not – or not only – this, what theory has psychology generated that is not merely recycled common sense dressed up in jargon or poached from other disciplines? Rose (1985) persuasively argued that the emerging discipline of psychology gained its distinctive role through the generation of methods that masquerade as theory. That is, psychological expertise resides only in controlling and applying (i.e. the administration of) technologies of assessment: testing, measurement and

classification. Linked to this interest in power/knowledge relations, Psychology has, in recent years, also witnessed a ‘psychoanalytical turn’, including an emphasis on clinical methods, designed to unearth fundamental assumptions in identity formations, underlining the importance of reflexivity.

Thus psychology’s complicity within strategies of social regulation makes it a prime arena for the study of both oppression and resistance. Contemporary critical, constructionist and feminist researchers focus on psychological practices as a way of studying ideology in action. Here discursive and other critical interpretive frameworks work both to engage with psychological methods and theories, and to maintain some critical distance from them.

## Sociology

*Sara Delamont*

Sociology began in the nineteenth century, as thinkers in the industrializing countries puzzled over the social upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution, the rapid growth of cities and the accompanying social changes. Three internal disputes characterized sociology then, and continue to divide it today: about epistemologies and theories; about empirical topics and methods; and about intellectual politics. Those unfamiliar with the discipline can find a more nuanced version of this summary in Delamont (2003).

One dispute is between those who prioritize thinking (theorizing) over empirical research. A second is between those who wish to harness sociology to political causes and those who wish it to be a non-political academic discipline. The third, within the empiricists, is between those who want research to emulate the natural sciences (loosely called positivists) and those who argue that because sociology investigates humans, who are reflexive beings, the methods must take account of that (interpretivists). Positivists use both quantitative and qualitative methods, while interpretivists use only qualitative ones. These perennial debates were central to the most famous sociology department of them all: Chicago in the Golden Age (1893–1933) and in the Second Silver Age (1945–65) (Fine, 1995).

The leading figures in the development of sociology have been German, French and American. Many world leaders in sociology, such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, are primarily desk-bound. Theorizing has higher status than empirical work. In the Anglophone world, theorists from continental Europe

are often revered for their ideas (Foucault for example) but the agenda setters for empirical research (qualitative and quantitative) are mainly American. Advances in multidimensional scaling, in telephone interviewing, in autoethnography and in visual methods are led from the USA.

The second and third disputes are fundamental to empirical sociology, and are complicated by controversies over gender, race and sexuality. James Davis (1994: 188), for example, is a positivist who wants American sociology to eschew all political issues, and writes furiously that the discipline’s ‘weak immune system’ has allowed it to be contaminated by ‘humanistic sociology’, ‘critical theory’, ‘grounded theory’, ‘ethnomethodology’, ‘postmodernism’, ‘ethnic studies’ and ‘feminist methodology’. His objects of hatred are a mixture of interpretivist perspectives and explicitly politically engaged stances such as anti-racism and anti-sexism. Until 1968 sociology was predominantly quantitative and positivist and used functional theories. There were qualitative researchers, but they were relatively unfashionable. Then, when the USA and other capitalist countries went through political upheavals, sociology diversified. In the USA the anti-war movement, Black Power and the rise of Women’s and Gay Liberation disrupted social sciences. In Europe the events of 1968, with working-class and student protest, had a similar effect. The overthrow of positivist, functionalist sociology was predicted by Alvin Gouldner (1971) in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. After 1968 four perspectives became fashionable: neo-Marxism (non-functional but often using positivist methods), conflict theories, ideas grounded in the sociology of knowledge, and interactionist approaches (symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology) (Giddens, 1973).

The lasting challenges to the orthodoxy of 1968 came with the poststructuralism and postmodernism of Lyotard (1984) and Foucault (1979) and radical ideas from the black, gay and women’s movements, namely critical race theory, queer theory and feminism. Sociology in the nineteenth century was male dominated, but since the 1890s there have been female scholars in the discipline, especially in empirical research. There have been, and are, women positivists and interpretivists, women opposed to politically engaged sociology and those who espouse it.

It is easy to be misled by the high-profile authors such as Denzin (2003) who are relentlessly innovative and passionate about the cultural turn and post-post-

postmodernism and thus think the whole discipline is suffused with radical ideas, and by much postcolonial sociology that seeks to study social relations in its broader global and historical context. In fact much of the research done in the USA remains very conventional and is not at methodological frontiers. Most sociologists in the world, and especially in America, are positivists in practice, who conduct traditional surveys by interview and questionnaire, analyse the data by SPSS, and present the results in journals and reports to sponsors written to a conventional hypothetical-deductive format and deploying essentially functionalist theories.

In research methods the biggest changes since 1968 are due to more sophisticated computing and the increased acceptability of qualitative methods. Analysis is more elaborate (Hardy and Bryman, 2004). Computing advances have revolutionized quantitative research: techniques that once took weeks now take seconds. The increased use of elaborate statistics makes much research hard to understand for a non-specialist. In qualitative research software to handle text (CAQDAS) has transformed analysis (Fielding, 2001). The rise of qualitative methods, evident from the number of journals and books devoted to them, has been spectacular. However, the core concerns of serious scholars have not changed over a century.

Researchers need to pick sensible research questions, design their investigations carefully, collect data honestly, analyse them imaginatively, write them up accessibly and generalize from them cautiously, all the time engaging in ruthless self-scrutiny to avoid bias, selective blindness and negligence, and to be their own toughest critics. Few sociologists live up to that ideal: but we should all strive to.

## Educational research

*Bridget Somekh*

Educational research draws extensively on the disciplines of sociology, psychology and philosophy. In this sense, education is not a discrete discipline, although it has been one of the focal sites for the development of social science theory. Key figures include Dewey (1944), who conceived of education as a child-centred process that underpinned democracy, and Greene (1988) who saw education as a means of personal growth.

Educational research is concerned not only with the activities of teachers and students in schools,

colleges and universities, but all life-long learning from cradle to grave. Governments fund education for the benefit of individuals and society as a whole. There are differences of opinion about the purposes of education, based on ideological factors. Some see education as primarily for the benefit of the individual and others see it as the means of producing the human resources necessary to maintain the economy. Research has to work within and around these different conceptions of education. Inevitably, therefore, educational research has a political dimension.

Key organizing concepts for education are those of curriculum and pedagogy. These terms are not always used with the same meanings. For example, curriculum can be taken to mean the specified learning set out in policy documents or the actual learning which results from students' experiences in the classroom (the 'traditional curriculum of teachers': Stenhouse, 1975; 'folk pedagogies': Bruner, 1996). Learning theories are also contested. For example, Piaget suggests that learning is dependent upon the child's development through fairly well-recognized stages, whereas Vygotsky suggests that the key factor in the development of mind is the process of interaction between the child and adults or peers (Bruner, 1997). Recently, Lave and others have emphasized the importance of 'situating' learning in directly supportive contexts (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Many educational researchers focus their attention on the processes whereby the power relations in society privilege some students at the expense of others. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of 'cultural capital' provides a framework for understanding how factors such as social class and parental education reproduce both social privilege and exclusion. Bowles and Gintis (1976) exemplified the operation of these theories in practice. Gilligan (1982) showed how social systems, including schooling and theory development, systematically discriminated against girls.

Educational research is increasingly politicized as a result of governments believing that there is a direct link between educational achievement and a strong economy. This has led to considerable interest in comparative league tables between countries based on standardized tests administered to students. The initial superiority of countries such as Singapore and Taiwan in key areas of numeracy and literacy led in the UK to government mandates for teachers to adopt pedagogic practices such as 'whole-class teaching'. This has been coupled with increasing pressure from governments to fund only research perceived to be

'relevant' (directly relating to the implementation and subsequent improvement of policies). Based on a model from medical research, educational researchers have been exhorted (and pressured through funding mechanisms) to adopt an 'evidence-based' approach. The need for bureaucrats to justify spending on education has led to increasing demands for 'hard data' generated by pseudo-positivist methods that purport to establish cause and effect between educational practice and improved test scores.

'School effectiveness' research uses quantitative methods to identify and track those features of schooling that correlate with high student outcomes. 'School improvement' research, which is frequently closely linked with development work, is generally more subtle than 'effectiveness' research, using a wider range of data and placing more emphasis on trends and changes over time. For example, there is a strong tradition of school ethnographies that have shown how theories of curriculum can be diverted in practice, for example through the influence of the 'hidden curriculum' embodied unintentionally in the (sub)cultures of schooling. Lightfoot's study (1983) exemplifies how this approach can illuminate educational practice.

A key problem in educational research relates to how policies for action might emerge from empirical investigations, and even more crucially how these might transform practice. Action research by teachers is recognized as a powerful strategy for bringing about improvements in teaching and learning and professional development (Elliott, 1991). This has been acknowledged and extended by policy-makers to include the larger notion of 'user involvement' of stakeholders in the implementation of research and – where possible – with its design. Recently in the UK the government has directly funded teachers to carry out research, generally within tightly prescribed limits regarding the subject of study (related to policy implementation), the methods of data collection and the form of reporting. 'Systematic reviews' of research literature have been funded by government to identify evidence of good practice and teachers have been encouraged to read this and other research and implement its findings.

Education research is often seen as *educational* in its processes as well as its effects. For example, researchers who acknowledge the educative nature of carrying out research are likely to adopt more participatory methods and may place less emphasis on seeking objective data and more on feeding back

preliminary findings to enable practitioners to learn from research knowledge as it is generated. Constructing research as 'educative' has ethical implications and has effects in terms of the quality of outcomes, for example through its ability to fine-tune findings to the field of study and increase their impact on practice, perhaps with less emphasis on producing generalizable findings.

## **Health research**

*Julienne Meyer*

Health research is concerned with the health of individuals, the care they receive and the services that are delivered to them. The activity of health research is informed by a number of different disciplines, for example medicine, nursing, allied health, social work, health economics, health management, medical sociology, health psychology, health and social care policy. However, historically health research has been dominated by the single discipline of medicine, which has tended to draw on positivist notions of science. In the past, medicine has held considerable power in shaping the research agenda and its prestige continues to influence the practice and governance of research today. This can be seen in the disproportionate funding still spent on medical research, its dominant presence in funding bodies and research committees and the tendency, until more recently, for systems and paperwork (e.g. ethical approval) to primarily meet the needs of large-scale quantitative medical research (e.g. randomized control trials), as opposed to more in-depth, smaller-scale qualitative studies. Researchers should be mindful of this historical legacy when applying for funding for health research, seeking ethical approval for their studies, dealing with gatekeepers to access research participants and seeking to publish their findings in more traditional academic journals.

More recently, medicine's authority over health research has been challenged. This is partly because the idea of health itself is a highly contested one, especially so in cross-cultural contexts. There is now more emphasis on involving actual and potential users of health services in research in order to make research more responsive to and appropriate for the needs of the population. This culture of being inclusive is being driven directly by government strategy, which is also encouraging use of a wider range of methods, a richer mix of multidisciplinary perspectives and better quality control mechanisms

for research and its implementation. These changes are part of a wider societal shift towards replacing or reforming established research institutions, disciplines, practices and policies. Gibbons et al. (1994), focusing on research and development in science and technology, argue the need for a new mode of research that emphasizes reflexivity, transdisciplinarity and heterogeneity. They suggest that research should not be set within a particular disciplinary framework (e.g. medicine), but should be undertaken in the context of its application (e.g. health and social care settings) and involve the close interaction of many actors throughout the process of knowledge production (e.g. different academic disciplines, multidisciplinary practitioners and users of health services).

However, these developments need to be set in the context of the simultaneous emergence of evidence-based healthcare internationally. Evidence-based practice is concerned with the implementation of the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research. International networks now exist to support the development of evidence-based medicine in the form of the Cochrane Collaboration, which has centres in the UK and continental Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australasia. To ensure better coordination from the centre, structures have been put in place to systematically review the quality of research findings and to disseminate good practice across a variety of health and social care disciplines. Researchers are expected to produce the evidence for best practice and practitioners are required to implement it. This linear approach to research and development has been challenged (Trinder and Reynolds, 2000).

Historically the evidence-based movement was seen to be associated with positivist notions of science and criticized for placing undue emphasis on randomized controlled trials as a gold standard against which to compare other evidence in systematic reviews of the literature (Hicks and Hennessey, 1997). It was argued that this approach ignored the contributions of other forms of research and failed to address the fact that scientific research appears to have had little impact on practice (Walshe et al., 1995). More recently, the evidence-based practice movement has responded to this by trying to eliminate bias through further refinements of the review process to produce a somewhat false sense of certainty. However, research is inherently a political process and, while debates continue as to whether the evidence-based movement has been guilty of focusing

too heavily on scientific evidence to guide practice, qualitative research has slowly been incorporated into the mainstream. This can be seen as part of a general trend in many applied social science disciplines leading increasingly to a focus on practitioner-centred research (Meyer, 1993). In healthcare, these approaches are gaining ground especially within nursing (Rolle, 1998) and it is argued that they fit well with the espoused values of new modes of research and practice development (Meyer, 2003).

Hence, an interesting paradox has emerged in the early twenty-first century. As political forces encourage health researchers to become more inclusive and use a wider range of methods, the same forces have imposed structures (e.g. research governance and evidence-based practice) to make health research less flexible and under more government control. For instance, practitioners wishing to research their own practice are constrained from doing so by bureaucratic systems of ethical approval. While these systems are designed to protect patients and NHS staff participating in research, they involve considerable time and effort and can be off-putting to those who wish to undertake small-scale work. The focus on tightening up governance systems thus runs counter to the encouraged use of more creative research (Normand et al., 2003).

### Social policy research

*Malcolm Payne*

Social policy, in the British tradition, studies both the political and social debate within which policy is formed and local and interpersonal effects of policy implementation. In the USA, the focus of public policy studies is more directly on government policy-formation, and work concerned with welfare policy is treated in many countries as an aspect of the academic study of social work. Comparative work on the effect of international trends in different systems of provision has also had an impact on the limited assumptions of much nationally based research. The international trends themselves have been a product of the impact of global institutions such as the OECD, UNICEF and UNESCO, increasingly promoting neo-liberal thinking, often imposing policy choices on nation-states.

This wide range of research topics relies on many of the well-established techniques of social science research such as attitude and opinion surveys or observational and interview studies. However, social

policy has a particular focus on analysis of official data and documents, and on placing official and informal policies on how social resources are distributed in a broad historical, philosophical and social context.

For example, Martin's (1984) analysis of scandals in long-stay hospitals in the 1960s used detailed documentary and historical analysis to explore how scandals emerged and official investigations led to political action. Reith's (1998) study of the official reports on 28 community care scandals in the 1990s points to how the policy effects of the scandals studied by Martin led to the discharge of many long-stay patients into the community in the 1980s, and thus to failings in community services in the 1990s. She analyses the failings exposed in mental health inquiries to show how social work practice during the 1990s changed, and draws lessons for future practice.

Social policy studies are often actively engaged in the political process, through the influence of 'think-tanks' and government initiatives. Social policy researchers carry out studies of how policy is implemented, the impact of policy changes and the evaluation of possible alternative patterns of service. For example, Townsend participated in a controversial government committee on health inequalities (Townsend and Davidson, 1988), which showed that poorer people were more likely to be unhealthy and to receive poorer services. In a later local social survey, Townsend et al. (1988) were able to show how people with ill-health were clustered in particular deprived communities.

Any major service development is likely to be the product of research or to be evaluated. For example, the care management element of the community care system implemented in the UK in the 1990s was strongly influenced by a service innovation in Kent importing American ideas evaluated by a university research unit (Davies and Challis, 1986). The project followed the establishment of teams, training of staff, introduction of service systems, economic and practical outcomes and effectiveness. After legislation introduced a new system, the government funded research to evaluate its success, which lay in achieving the government's economic objectives to restrict costs rather than professional objectives to improve services (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996). This included the collection of national statistics and case studies of different kinds of local authority. Both these studies interviewed participants in both informal and structured ways and analysed service data. Research studies by social work professionals, mainly using semi-

structured interviews, have highlighted the loss of expertise and routinization of social work practice that has resulted (Gorman and Postle, 2003). Public authorities and charities audit and evaluate their everyday services and innovations, requiring consumer surveys and more complex measures to achieve public participation.

Such research has usually focused on a specific area of service or social problem, such as housing, health or poverty. However, social policy has also been concerned with generalizing about the process by which policy is formed. Levin (1997) identifies the three main processes to be researched as the formulation of policy, its adaptation in political and social processes and its implementation. Research may focus on powerful stakeholders, participants (such as politicians or service users), interests (such as the conflict between provider and consumer interests) and processes, such as participants' actions and decisions, and the outcomes of these.

Some examples illustrate the range of methods. Hall's (1976) study of the Seebohm reorganization of the social services and Nesbitt's (1995) account of the social security reforms of the 1980s used interviews with influential policy-makers, as well as documentary sources. Policy process analysis (Hill, 1997) looks at how services are managed and organized to implement policies. Sometimes, this is done by observational studies of organizations, such as Lipsky's (1980) work on street-level bureaucracy, in which he shows that discretion exercised by workers at quite low levels of organizations can redirect policy initiatives. Much of this work has links with management and public administration studies. Pithouse's (1998) ethnographic study of how workers managed childcare work in a local social services office involved both observation and interviews with professionals to show how they interpreted and managed complex work implementing official policy.

## **Research in Management and Business Studies**

*Richard Thorpe*

Social science as applied to management and industrial organization began from the 'scientific' approach adopted by managers such as F.W. Taylor, Gantt and Gilbreth (Lupton, 1966). Taylor (1947) maintained that the functions managers should perform were planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling. He stressed the systematic study of work, focusing on

such aspects as poor tools, organization and management. The research methods of this early period were based on natural science principles and adopted experimental designs. After 1945 business schools sought greater academic respectability and disciplines such as finance, marketing, operations research and organizational behaviour strengthened greatly. During the 1960s a view developed that the key to effective management was the ability to take decisions, particularly under conditions of uncertainty (Cyert and March, 1963). As a consequence quantitative methods of analysis and model building still dominate the curricula of many business schools, especially in the USA and France.

However, in a parallel development, some researchers moved their attention to the psychological and sociological aspects of work. With this shift in focus came new and different methods, such as the study of groups and relationships at work using participant observers (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). These studies demonstrated the importance of informal leaders and showed that satisfaction came from the quality of supervision and the social relationships formed as well as from monetary reward. Early contingency theorists, as they became known, undertook careful diagnosis of key variables on a case-by-case basis, focusing on a range of organizational issues, including the type of technology within a firm's organizational structure (Woodward, 1959) and the impact of market volatility on management systems (Burns and Stalker, 1961). Adopting a 'best fit' approach the methods used in these investigations were both quantitative and qualitative. There was a gradual recognition that positivistic methods, with an emphasis on objectivity, were not always the most appropriate. As globalization increased, the focus shifted further to the ways in which management is practised from international and cross-cultural perspectives (Hofstede, 1980). It continues to be the case that different countries value different methodological approaches to research: these too are culturally bound.

During the last two decades 'classical' theory (namely Taylor) and 'decisions' theory (namely Cyert and March) have come under attack. Both are 'normative' theories which have implications for the questions that are worth researching and the methods to be employed. However, in both there is some confusion between what management is and what it ought to be. This has led to critiques which suggest that approaches to management research should

adapt to meet the challenges of the future (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). There is also more or less universal recognition that managers need to be concerned with the application of theories in the workplace as opposed to simply the ideas themselves. The 1990s saw the emergence of a postmodern debate in management which queried beliefs in 'one world' with 'one truth', and began to develop a radical relativism that conceived of a world where no consensus exists and 'no rigorous evaluative criteria remain' (Holbrook and Hirschmann, 1982). Key assumptions concerning new forms of capitalism have also been a major strand in critical management studies.

### *Forms of research*

The main classifications of research that have emerged from the management tradition described above are pure, applied and action research.

Pure research, which is sometimes referred to as domain driven, is intended to lead to theoretical development: there may, or may not, be any practical implications of this. Results are disseminated through academic media. Applied research is intended to lead to the solution of specific problems and usually involves working with clients who identify the problems. In these studies it is important to try to explain what is happening. Phillips and Pugh (1987) stress that genuine research must include consideration of 'why' questions as well as 'what' questions.

Action research studies start from the view that research should lead to change, and therefore that change should be incorporated into the research process itself. Classical action research starts from the idea that if you want to understand something well you should try changing it, and this is most frequently adopted in organization development (French and Bell, 1978). The collaborative features of action research mean that participants are likely to learn a lot from the process itself, and their interest may be on what happens next rather than on any formal account of research findings. Within the action research tradition, Gibbons et al. (1994) introduced an important debate on the nature of knowledge and approaches to knowledge generation in management. Mode 1 knowledge generation occurs within the context of existing institutions and academic disciplines. In contrast, mode 2 is transdisciplinary and created in context by those who combine their tacit/practitioner understandings with those of academics. The key aspect of mode 2 knowledge

production is that it occurs as a result of the interaction that takes place between theory and practice. Management also requires both thought and

action. Not only do most managers feel that research should lead to practical consequences, they are also quite capable of taking action themselves in the light of research results.

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