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RESEARCH METHODS

A practical guide for the social sciences

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Visit the *Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences* Companion Website at **www.pearsoned.co.uk/matthews** to find valuable student learning material including:

- Video of two focus groups, showing this exciting data collection method in practise.
- Videos of interviews, with full transcriptions, to let you practise coding and analysing interview data.
- Animated maths walkthroughs talk you through the basics of collecting and interpreting data.
- Checklists and exercises from this book – print them out, fill them in, and watch your project come together!
- Interactive decision-making exercises to help you choose the best methods for your project.
- Real life questionnaire and a sample Excel dataset of results, to let you practise your question-building and analysis skills.
- Annotated weblinks to relevant organisations to help you take your own project further.
- An online glossary to explain key terms.
- Flashcards to test your understanding of key terms.
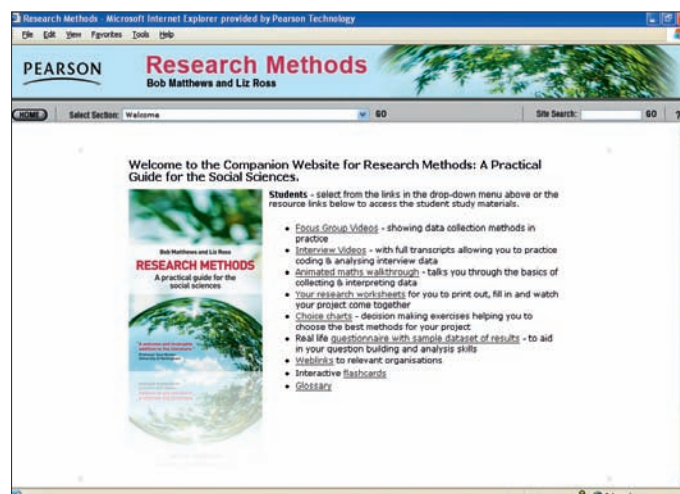
- Are you able to identify clear boundaries to your case study?
- What will you be able to claim for your findings in terms of how they might be generalised or their theoretical value, and their explanatory value?
- Does the research design enable you to collect data that 'stands in' for social reality – data that reflects the social reality of natural social settings?
- Does the research design enable you to collect data in a consistent and reliable way?
- What are the ethical implications of your research design for your research participants?

The four research designs – experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal and case study – provide the data collection and analysis frameworks with which we can begin to put together our own research plans. We now need to revisit our research questions and, bearing in mind these four designs, look at the overall research strategy needed to address these.

Your research

In this section we have taken the example research topic of 'students and alcohol' and suggested example research designs which could be used to study the topic. Taking your own research topic, can you suggest how you might study it using each of the designs?

Quasi-experimental

Cross-sectional

Longitudinal

Case study

Research strategies

A research strategy is essentially a research plan. It may be that the four basic research designs we have considered are sufficient for you to be able to plan your research. However, it may also be useful to consider some variations or specific developments of these designs, which have emerged during the history of social research from researchers who have sought to refine and experiment with different ways of studying social phenomena.

We will consider comparative research, evaluation, ethnography and Grounded Theory. Within each of these approaches to research, one or more of the four research designs already introduced will usually be found.

Comparative research

Comparative research designs are often used to study two or more countries or two or more cultures, and are perhaps most commonly used within policy studies. Typically, the research design will include a detailed examination of a particular aspect, policy, issue or

characteristic within each of the countries or cultures, and compare these on the basis of a set of common criteria. The researcher is interested not just in the similarities and differences between the two cases, but also in the differences in the two contexts. These may include the history, customs, institutions, ideologies, values and lifestyles of the country, culture, organisation or community. The researcher is likely to be interested in how these impact on the research area.

Comparative research often uses a multiple case study design, allowing in-depth study of each case (country or culture), and aims to explain the similarities and differences between the cases.

Why use a comparative research strategy?

In cases of cross-national and cross-cultural comparative research, the study of another country or culture to one's own is seen to produce greater awareness and understanding of one's own country or culture, as it provides the opportunity to look 'through different eyes' at a familiar situation. Comparative research may also be used as the basis for developing typologies or models of the ways different countries or cultures organise or think about themselves. For example, Esping-Andersen has developed a typology of states with regard to their approach to social welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Other comparative social policy researchers can then test out the usefulness of the model in not only understanding different countries but also how they change through time.

The overall comparative framework typically draws on both cross-sectional and case study designs. The criteria for comparison must reflect the research questions and point to the nature of the data that needs to be gathered. This may be a mixture of individual data, documents and statistics – often largely secondary data.

harmonised data
Data gathered from a range of different sources but which take account of the differences in the way the data has been collected, enabling researchers to access comparative data.

Gathering data for a comparative cross-national study has become more accessible to students with the development of a number of sources of **harmonised data**. One of the difficulties of undertaking cross-national research has been securing access to a range of comparable data from each country. Organisations like the OECD (www.oecd.org, accessed 20 July 2009) and European Union (EuroStat, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/, accessed 20 July 2009) now gather similar data from a range of countries and set out the differences in the way the data has been collected, enabling researchers to access comparative data from countries around the world. The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe referred to in the following 'Real research' box is an example of research that is taking place across the countries of Europe, and which can provide comparable data on particular issues for a student interested in this topic.

Real research

Comparative study

M. Albertini, M. Kohli and C. Vogel (2007) Intergenerational transfers of time and money in European families: common patterns different regimes, *International Journal of European Social Policy*, 17: 319

Given the ageing population of most European countries and the cost of supporting older people, this research looked at how money and resources flow between generations in ten European countries.

What the researchers wanted to find out

They wanted to know more about the transfer of money and other resources, including social support and care of grandchildren, between parents and their adult children. Do patterns differ in different welfare regimes?

What they did

They used data from 22,777 people from ten European countries (excluding the UK) gathered as part of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE, www.share-project.org/), a longitudinal, multidisciplinary and cross-national survey representing the population of individuals aged 50 and over in Europe. They then looked for differences between countries using a welfare regimes typology.

Findings

They found that across all countries there was a net outflow from parents to adult children, particularly among the younger parents. However, money and resources were transferred from parents to adult children less frequently but 'more intensely' in Southern European countries and differences were found to reflect differences in welfare regimes.

The research design

The researchers were able to use data already collected in a large-scale cross-sectional survey which asked the same questions of people aged over 50 years from ten different European countries. The research could be regarded as opportunist in that the data was available through this large-scale survey and appropriate for their research questions. They were also able to draw on existing theoretical models of welfare regimes to help them to explain the differences they found.

Your research

Research quality check: comparative social research

- How will you justify your choice of cases? What is the basis of your comparison?
- Have you identified the criteria on which you will compare the two cases?
- Will you be able to identify comparable data about your two research foci?
- How will you address issues of difference in language, culture and interpretation?
- Will you be dependent on secondary data – data collected by others and for different purposes? How will you justify and explain this?
- Will you be able to collect data in a consistent and reliable way from both cases?
- Are there any ethical implications of your study?

Evaluation

To 'evaluate' essentially means to assess the value of something in terms of the impact that it has on a situation, individual(s) or organisation. Evaluatory social research usually relates to an intervention or change that has been made, and whether the intervention has achieved the change or outcomes that were intended. The key issue is to decide how those outcomes are to be identified and measured. Value may be defined in terms of observable or measurable benefit to particular groups of people, efficiency, satisfaction, value for money or improvement in practice.

A quasi-experimental design may be appropriate for evaluatory research where an intervention has been introduced in one situation but not in another (control). Alternatively, a

longitudinal design may be appropriate where data is collected before and after an intervention. On the other hand, there are likely to be elements of both cross-sectional design and possibly case study design within a piece of evaluatory research as well.

Why do evaluatory research?

1. To find out whether an intervention or change has had the desired outcomes.
2. To assess how well a process (policy implementation, practice) is working.
3. To consider how a process or intervention might be improved.
4. To assess whether the costs of the process (service, policy implementation, etc.) is value for money or 'best value'.
5. To find out what works (or doesn't work) and why.

Often a range of data is collected to provide evidence of 'value'. This may include both quantitative and qualitative data, from a range of individuals. For example, an evaluation of the introduction of a new service may include:

- quantitative data showing how many and what type of people use the service;
- satisfaction data from people who use the service;
- in-depth data from people who use the service, relating their experience and perceptions;
- opinions of service deliverers – practitioners and managers on how well the service has been delivered and their perceptions of the impact;
- documentary evidence of the way the service has been designed and delivered, e.g. plans, minutes of meetings.

Real research

Evaluation

J. Hirst, E. Formby, S. Parr, J. Nixon and C. Hunter (2007) *An Evaluation of Two Initiatives to Reward Young People*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, available at www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/ housing/ 2149.asp (accessed 11 September 2008)

Concern about the behaviour of young people in some neighbourhoods led the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust to devise a scheme whereby young people would be rewarded for 'good' behaviour by collecting points for activities that were socially helpful. The points could be used to claim rewards, for example, cinema tickets. The scheme was set up in areas of two British towns.

What the researchers did

The researchers were asked to evaluate the scheme in terms of how the scheme had worked in the two towns, the young people's perceptions of the scheme and whether there was any growth in tolerance towards young people and their activities.

Data was collected using a variety of methods – interviews, focus groups and participatory research – and involving the different stakeholders (including young people who had participated and some who had not), staff and residents.

Findings

The scheme had operated with different levels of success in the two towns. Neither had been successful in engaging young people over 15 to the scheme. There was

some evidence in one town that young people had become more involved in community activities. However, the evaluation was unable to show whether there was any growth in tolerance towards young people, or that the scheme would have longer-term success.

The research design

The initial design of the project that set up the scheme in two towns provided the basis for the evaluation. This ensured that the specific contexts in each town (including the level of resources) and how this might have impacted on the scheme could be considered. A range of stakeholders were included in the evaluation, including young people who had not participated (a sort of control group).

Evaluation research is usually – but not always – designed to be of value to its commissioners, or to others working in similar areas. It may be carried out with a view to identifying areas for improvement or to identify lessons for others in similar situations.

Within social policy and social work arenas, evaluatory research is often linked to the assessment of the impact of new policies, practices or projects and is designed to assess both whether it has worked in the way that was intended and why. UK academics Pawson and Tilley (1997) have introduced the idea of realistic evaluation which follows the underpinning ideas of critical realism (A2). They suggest that the research needs to be designed so that the question 'why did/didn't it work?' can be answered.

Your research

Research quality check: evaluatory research

- Will the data that you collect help you to address the evaluation questions?
- Do you have comparable 'baseline data' – data gathered before the intervention or change was introduced?
- Are you able to gather data from a range of 'stakeholders', people with different interests in the focus of the evaluation?
- What is your position with regard to the evaluation and the participants? Are you external to the situation or an 'insider'?
- Does the research design enable you to claim that your research findings can be generalised to a wider population or different setting? This will depend on the way you have selected your evaluation participants.
- Does the research design enable you to collect data that 'stands in' for social reality – data that reflects the social reality of natural social settings?
- Can you ensure that data has been collected in a consistent and reliable way?
- What are the ethical implications of the evaluation for the various stakeholder participants?

Ethnography

What makes an ethnographical study different from other types of study is the relationship of the researcher with the data that is collected. In ethnographical research the researcher spends time (sometimes a number of years) immersed within the research context, seeing

and hearing the data at first hand. This is often called 'the field' or 'a natural setting'. Typically the researcher takes a role within the setting that will allow him to participate in the research context as a researcher and as a participant. Popular media/documentary examples would be Louis Theroux (see for example, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7753282.stm, accessed 20 July 2009) and Bruce Parry (www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/bruce/index.shtml, accessed 20 July 2009).

The researcher keeps a reflective diary and his reflections become part of the data that is worked with. Data is analysed as it is collected, and this may then influence the way further data is collected. Data is typically collected using participant observation, conversations and sometimes more formal interviews. Relevant documents may also be included. Data may also be gathered using visual recording through photographs or videos. (If you are interested in this, see the further reading suggestions at the end of this chapter.)

Effectively, ethnography follows a case study design. However, there is the added dimension of the researcher participating in the social phenomenon under study and seeking, through that participation and regular data collection and reflection, to gain a deeper understanding of the culture of the group, organisation or community. This is gained by observing how people construct social meaning and actions in everyday life.

Although a lengthy ethnographical study is unlikely to be feasible for most students, it is possible to design a shorter study, perhaps focused in an organisation or group of which you are already a member or in a part-time job, over a period of weeks rather than years.

An ethnographical study is not about just gathering as much data as possible. There must be a focus – a research question to address – which may be related to the way people interact, what hierarchies can be observed in the way people work together and how participants organise themselves.

Real research

Ethnographical study

Judy Yuen-man Sui (2008) The SARS-associated stigma of SARS victims in the post-SARS era of Hong Kong, *Qualitative Health Research*, 18: 729

In 2003 there were outbreaks of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in Hong Kong. This new life-threatening disease is highly contagious, and there was worldwide concern about it spreading, and the ability of medical personnel to contain it. Around 1,700 people were infected, of whom 299 people died. Those who were infected but survived found themselves stigmatised and discriminated against, and many continued to suffer from physical and psychological difficulties. For example, some still wore face masks in public places because others feared they were infectious.

What the researcher did

The researcher was interested in how the stigma and discrimination associated with SARS victims had been constructed in the society. She wanted to understand the experiences and perceptions of SARS victims, and chose to spend some 16 months in close contact with a SARS self-help group. She collected data through participant observation, interviews, attending meetings and conversations. All the participants were informed about the research. A research diary was kept and the reflections and interpretations of the researcher were checked with participants.

Findings

The researcher found that the stigma attached to being a SARS victim was experienced and understood related to the way that medical doctors, the government and the public still treat SARS victims as different.