

This is a list which is remarkably similar to that put forward above in box 2.6 as underlying the realist position, suggesting a helpful compatibility between the realist and the pragmatic.

Further Reading

- Archer, M., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T. and Norrie, A. (1998) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London and New York: Routledge. Definitive set of readings on critical realism.
- Blaikie, N. (1993) *Approaches to Social Enquiry*. Cambridge: Polity. A comprehensive, balanced and up-to-date text covering both the philosophy and the methodology of the social sciences.
- Byrne, D. (1998) *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: An Introduction*. London: Routledge. Fascinating introduction to chaos/complexity theories and their implications for social research. Written from a realist perspective.
- Delanty, G. (1997) *Social Science: Beyond Constructivism and Realism*. Buckingham: Open University Press. Concise challenging text arguing for a synthesis of constructivism and realism.
- Elster, J. (1989) *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Short, engaging and idiosyncratic introduction to the philosophy of the social sciences. After reading this your world will be full of mechanisms.
- Pettigrew, T. F. (1996) *How to Think Like a Social Scientist*. New York: HarperCollins. Concise, personal style. Fosters critical thinking on important issues such as theory, comparison, causation, sampling, levels, etc. Big on healthy scepticism.
- Sayer, A. (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage. Authoritative guide to critical realism including its implications for social science research.
- Smith, M. J. (1998) *Social Science in Question*. London: Sage/Milton Keynes: Open University Press. Comprehensive and well-structured account of current dilemmas and debates in the philosophy of the social sciences and their implications for research practice.

3 Developing Your Ideas

This chapter:

- reviews differences in developing fixed and flexible design research;
- helps you decide on the focus of your enquiry, emphasizing the advantages of 'starting where you are';
- considers tactics for researching the background, including database searches;
- discusses how this focus can be refined into research questions, and
- the role of theory in this process;
- emphasizes the importance of ethical issues;
- highlights questionable practices that you should avoid;
- stresses the political arena within which real world research is carried out; and
- concludes with some warnings about sexism in research.

Introduction

The task of carrying out an enquiry is complicated by the fact that there is no overall consensus about how to conceptualize the doing of research. This shows in various ways. There are, for example, different views about the place and role of theory; also about the sequence and relationship of the activities involved. One model says that you need to know exactly what you are doing before collecting the data that you are going to analyse; and that you collect all this data before starting to analyse it. A different approach expects you to develop your design through interaction with whatever you are studying, and has data collection and analysis intertwined. These approaches were referred to in chapter 1 as *fixed designs* and *flexible* designs respectively. The former

have their antecedents in the traditions variously labelled as positivistic, natural-science based, hypothetico-deductive, quantitative or even simply 'scientific'; the latter in ones known as interpretive, ethnographic or qualitative – among several other labels.

Spradley (1980) compares these two research approaches to petroleum engineers and explorers respectively:

The [petroleum] engineer has a specific goal in mind; to find oil or gas buried far below the surface. Before the engineer even begins an investigation, a careful study will be made of the maps which show geological features of the area. Then, knowing ahead of the time the kinds of features that suggest oil or gas beneath the surface, the engineer will go out to 'find' something quite specific. (p. 26)

To follow the fixed design route, you have to be in the position of knowing what you are looking for. However, those following flexible designs begin much more generally. They explore,

gathering information, going first in one direction then perhaps retracing that route, then starting out in a new direction. On discovering a lake in the middle of a large wooded area, the explorer would take frequent compass readings, check the angle of the sun, take notes about prominent landmarks, and use feedback from each observation to modify earlier information. (p. 26)

For those interested in carrying out relatively small-scale real world investigations, each of these traditional models presents difficulties. A problem in following fixed designs is that one is often forced to work with maps that are sketchy at best. In other words, the firm theoretical base that is called for is difficult to get hold of. Similarly, free-range exploring is rarely on the cards. For one thing, there isn't the time; and the real world enquirer often has some idea of the 'lie of the land', and is looking for something quite specific while still being open to unexpected discoveries.

This suggests that real world researchers may need to be somewhat innovative in their approach, not automatically following research traditions when they do not quite fit the purposes and context of the research task. Fortunately, researchers do already seem to be more eclectic in their actual research practice than methodologists urge them to be. Bryman (1988a) makes out a strong case that many of the differences between the two traditions exist in the minds of philosophers and theorists, rather than in the practices of researchers. For example, he concludes that

the suggestion that quantitative research is associated with the testing of theories, whilst qualitative research is associated with the generation of theories, can be viewed as a convention that has little to do with either the practices of many

researchers within the two traditions or the potential of the methods of data collection themselves. (p. 172)

Undoubtedly there are situations and topics where a fixed design following a quantitative approach is called for, and others where a flexible qualitative study is appropriate. But there are 'still others [which] will be even better served by a marriage of the two traditions' (p. 173). This view that the differences between the two traditions can be best viewed as technical rather than epistemological, enabling the enquirer to 'mix and match' both methodologies and methods according to what best fits a particular study, is developed in chapter 12 below.

Deciding on the focus

A *The need for a focus*

Before you can start, you obviously need to have some idea of what area you are going to deal with. This amounts to deciding on your focus. My experience is that this tends either to be quite straightforward, almost self-evident (especially when you are told what to do!); or pretty problematic (when you have an open field).

Finding the focus involves identifying what it is that you want to gather information about. Until you have done this, further planning is impossible. If you are deciding for yourself, with few or no external constraints, the decision will be driven by what you are interested in and concerned about. Any research or enquiry experience that you already have can be a legitimate influence on this decision, but you should beware of this having a straitjacket effect (e.g. simply looking for topics where you might use your survey experience). Conversely, it is also legitimate to select a focus which leads you to branch out and gain experience of a strategy or technique not already within your 'toolbag'.

Sometimes the idea comes from your own direct experience or observation (see 'Starting where you are' below). Or it may arise from discussion with others about what would be timely and useful. Much real world research is sparked off by wanting to solve a problem, or a concern for change and improvement in something to do with practice. Neuman (1994, p. 110) suggests, in addition, curiosity based on something in the media, personal values, everyday life, and topics of current interest and concern where funding is more likely.

It is helpful to try to write down the research focus at this stage, even if you can only do this in a vague and tentative form. Later stages in the process will help to refine it and get it more clearly focused. Box 3.1 gives a varied set of examples.

continued

Box 3.1

Examples of initial proposals for research foci

- The 'quality of life' in the community for ex-patients of a closed-down psychiatric hospital
- A successful 'job club'
- The effectiveness of 'Work-Link' in providing jobs for the young disabled
- Helping carers of geriatric relatives
- Evaluating a short course in Rogerian counselling
- Dramatherapy with sexually abused children
- Approaches to curriculum in 16–19-year-old pupils with severe learning difficulties
- Facilitating change in small organizations through a computer version of the Delphi Nominal Group approach
- The 'Young Terriers': youth section of a football supporters club
- Failing the first year of an engineering degree: how not to do it
- The social function of a hairdressing salon
- Introducing a student-led assessment into a course
- Woman-centred maternity care

B Making a group decision

If you are proposing to carry out a group project with colleagues or friends, it is valuable for each member independently to think about, and write down, their proposals for the research focus. The group then comes together to decide on an agreed focus. In this way, all members of the group have some input into the process, and ideas of combining individual input with group collaboration and negotiation get built in at an early stage. Hall and Hall (1996, pp. 22–7) provide useful practical advice on working in groups, covering areas such as group development, unwritten contracts, team roles and leadership.

C Having the decision made for you

In many cases, the focus of a real world enquiry is given to the investigator(s) as a part of the job, or as a commission or tender. That is not to say that the people giving the task to the investigators necessarily know what they want, or that the investigators agree that this is what they should be wanting. The main task in this situation is clarificatory: translating the problem presented into something researchable and, moreover, 'do-able' within the limits of the time, resources and finance that can be made available.

continued

D Starting where you are

If you do have some say in the choice of topic, there are several factors which might be taken into account. *Interest* is probably the most important. *All enquiry involves drudgery and frustration, and you need to have a strong interest in the topic to keep you going through the bad times.* Such interest in the focus of the research is not the same thing as having a closed and pre-judged view of the nature of the phenomenon to be researched or the kind of outcomes that will be found, which is likely to affect the objectivity and trustworthiness of the research. All of these aspects, however, are a part of what Lofland and Lofland (1995) call 'starting where you are'. Box 3.2 gives examples. As Kirby and McKenna (1989) put it: 'Remember that who you are has a central place in the research process because you bring your own thoughts, aspirations and feelings, and your own ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, family background, schooling, etc. to your research' (p. 46).

This open acknowledgement of what the enquirer brings to the enquiry is more common in some research traditions than others. However, even in traditional laboratory experimentation, the work of Robert Rosenthal and colleagues (e.g. Rosnow and Rosenthal, 1997) has led to a recognition of 'experimenter effects' of various kinds, although they tend to be viewed solely in terms of the difficulties they produce.

Box 3.2

Examples of 'starting where you are'

Where they were:

An expectant parent exploring birthing options
Serving as escorts at an abortion clinic

Working at a small iron foundry when a wildcat strike occurred

Leaving a nunnery

In prison

What they did:

DeVries, G. (1985) Regulating birth: midwives, medicine and the law

Dilorio, J. A. and Nusbaumer, M. R. (1993) Securing our sanity: anger management among abortion escorts

Fantasia, R. (1988) Cultures of solidarity: consciousness, action, and contemporary American workers

Ebaugh, H. R. F. (1988) Becoming an EX: the process of role exit

Irwin, J. (1985) *The Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society*

(Abridged from Lofland and Lofland, 1995, pp. 12–13, who provide additional examples.)

continued

Enquirers selecting their own foci make the choice for a variety of reasons. It may be, for example, to address a problem of 'practice'. That is, as professionals (psychologists, social workers, health service workers, teachers, managers, personnel officers, etc.) they wish to look at, perhaps evaluate or change, some aspect of practice that interests or concerns them. It may be their own, or colleagues', practice or professional situations, or those of others whom they have a responsibility to advise or support. Frequently encountered problems are obviously a sensible choice for a research focus as anything useful that you find out has a direct spin-off; and, importantly, there will be no shortage of instances to study.

In such situations you are also likely to know a lot about the topic even before starting the research, which can assist in planning the research. Maxwell (1996) comments: 'Traditionally, what you bring to the research from your background and identity has been treated as *bias*, something whose influence needs to be eliminated from the design, rather than a valuable component of it' (p. 27; emphasis in original).

Because of this there is a tendency, particularly in proposals from students, to ignore what the proposer can bring to the study from their own experience about the settings and issues to be studied. Maxwell's view is that such *experiential knowledge* can be profitably capitalized on. The potential for bias still exists, of course, and it will be necessary to seek to counter this by examining the assumptions and values you bring to the situation. One approach to this is to use an *experience memo* which articulates the expectations, beliefs and understandings you have from previous experience. Maxwell (1996, pp. 30–1) and Grady and Wallston (1988, p. 41) provide examples.

E Researching the background

The approach to deciding on the research focus suggested here differs from traditional views of the origins of research tasks. These see them as rooted in the academic discipline, revealed through the research literature and theoretical or methodological concerns. This places a considerable onus on researchers. They must have a thorough and up-to-date understanding of the 'literature'; detailed background knowledge of the relevant discipline; technical proficiency; and substantial time and resources. Bentz and Shapiro (1998, pp. 72–4) provide useful suggestions for getting started in more traditional research.

In many 'real world' studies, it can be argued that the research literature, and the discipline, provide a *background resource* rather than the essential starting point for research designs (Walker, 1985, p. 13). This change of view is important because of the change in power relationship between investigator and practitioner that it suggests. The researcher does not set the agenda in isolation, but acts in partnership with a variety of client groups. One way in which this can be implemented is for those who have been, in the past, the *subjects* of research now to play a role in carrying out the research. This applies with particular force to the part of the enquiry that is concerned with conceptualizing the task and deciding

on the research questions. (Note: There is a recent change in terminology in experimental research. It is advocated that those taking part, formerly referred to as 'subjects', should now be 'participants'. This very rarely indicates that they do anything other than what the experimenter has pre-ordained; nevertheless, it is a recognition of the negative connotations of the previous term. This change is adopted in chapter 5, p. 110.)

A good understanding about what is already known, or established, does not then have the absolutely central role in applied real world enquiry that it does in fundamental, discipline-developing research. However, it can still be of considerable value. It may be possible to get background information from persons who have done related work, either directly or through the 'literature'. Unfortunately, for many real world topics, that literature tends to be somewhat inaccessible and fragmentary.

A general strategy would start with the various databases which contain bibliographic information relating to your area of interest. Box 3.3 gives a selection of widely used sources. Mertens (1998, p. 40) and Thomas (1996, p. 135) list other sources. While several of these sources are available in print form, they can be more efficiently and effectively searched using CD-ROM versions or on-line via World Wide Web (WWW) sites. Such databases typically include journal articles, books and book chapters. Often abstracts are provided which help in judging whether something is likely to be of interest. Watson and Richardson (1999) provide an interesting comparative analysis of Medline and PsychINFO showing substantial problems in the necessary search strategies and suggesting that while such searches

Box 3.3

Sources for an initial database search

<i>ASSIA</i>	Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts
<i>ERIC</i>	Educational Resources; includes journals, research reports, conference proceedings, etc.; American based.
<i>BEI</i>	British Education Index; UK equivalent of ERIC
<i>Medline</i>	Covers medicine, nursing, pharmacology, pharmacy and other health-related areas
<i>CINAHL</i>	Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature
<i>PsychINFO</i>	Electronic version of <i>Psychological Abstracts</i> (American Psychological Association)
<i>Sociofile</i>	Covers wide range of journals in sociology, anthropology and social work. Also covers 'social' areas of education, health and psychology
<i>SSCI</i>	Social Sciences Citation Index. Lists works which cite a particular article.

continued

will find relevant material, they are likely to fail to identify substantial amounts of other relevant studies.

Citation indices (of which the Social Sciences Citation Index – SSCI – is likely to be of particular interest) are invaluable as they enable you to travel forward in time from a particular reference via later authors who have cited the initial work. My experience has been that with real world research, there are likely to be very few really central references that you can get hold of, and citation indices help you to see how others have taken them forward.

Most of these databases work on very similar lines, and it is worth investing time and effort in becoming familiar with them. *Key word searches* (i.e. for words occurring in the title, abstract and/or descriptors of the article) and *subject searches* (for the descriptors used by the compilers of the database to categorize the article, which are listed in the thesaurus of the database) can be an efficient way of pinpointing relevant material. In doing this, one usually starts by getting an unmanageably large number of 'hits'; or, less frequently, very few of them.

A more focused search is obtained by combining the words or terms you use. Thus, asking for 'A and B' restricts the search to articles having both of whatever words or terms A and B represent. The search can be broadened by asking for 'A or B', and also by using truncated versions of key terms (e.g. when searching for material in the field of 'disability', 'disab*' will pick up 'disabilities', 'disabled' and anything else starting with 'disab' as well – but note that the truncation symbol, here shown as '*', varies from one database to another). You will often also get ideas for broadening the search by noting other descriptors of articles you have picked out, which did not occur to you originally.

You should use on-line 'help' facilities to find out exactly how to refine your search for specific databases. Also seek help and advice from librarians. Cooper (1998) gives details on the use of these technological aids to reviewing existing literature. Burton (2000) and Hart (1998) provide more general advice on the task.

From the information and abstracts in the databases, you then move on to primary material in books and journals. Increasingly, full-text journal articles are available for downloading through the internet, although these may have to be paid for unless you have links to libraries which take out subscriptions to these journals. Some journals are available only in electronic format (e-journals). Some are of high quality and can contain very up-to-date material. However, it may be difficult, as with much WWW material, to assess its quality. Looking through contents pages of journals (whether in paper or electronic format) containing the references located from the database can be helpful. My experience has been that quite often when key words have indicated a specific journal article, adjacent articles in the same journal have been of greater interest or relevance (perhaps a variant of the dictionary phenomenon, where words next to the one you are looking up are often more interesting!).

Note: Copyright conditions for the use of electronic databases usually permit their use for academic and non-profit-making research purposes, but exclude use for

research, consultancy or services for commercial purposes. This may be an issue for some real world research.

Documenting your search It is not too difficult to use these suggestions for the starting point of a hunt through what is currently in print which is relevant to your study. As this proceeds, it is important to ensure that you keep a record of what you have found. Bibliographic information needs to be full and accurate. If you just jot down a name and a date, you may have to spend hours later trying to find the full details. There are several styles. A common one (followed broadly but not slavishly in this text) is based upon the American Psychological Association's (1994) 'Publication Manual'. The APA also provides recommendations for electronic reference formats. Thus their document on this topic should be cited as:

Electronic reference formats recommended by the American Psychological Association (2000, September 5). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved October 31, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.apa.org/journals/webref.html>

Note the need to give the date of retrieval for documents on the Web which can change, move or disappear; website addresses themselves, however, are typically presented undated.

When building up a database of the books and articles to which you have referred, a major decision is whether to follow the traditional route of paper index cards or to use bibliographic software such as Endnote and ProCite (both published by ISI ResearchSoft) or Idealist (Blackwell, 1995). The latter option is worthwhile if you are going to build up big lists of references. However, you need to be careful to keep up good housekeeping practices, ensuring that you have up-to-date copies at all times. Losing a large list of references two days before you have to complete a report is no joke!

You will usually want to supplement the reference itself with notes of what you have got from it. How you do this is very much up to you, but there is little to be said for laboriously transcribing great chunks of material. Orna with Stevens (1995, pp. 43–58) provide an excellent set of suggestions.

Networking Searching through databases can be supplemented by networking in various ways. It is highly likely that people are already doing work linked to the topic you are interested in. If your research is being supervised, perhaps for some award or qualification, then your supervisor or supervisors should be key resources. (If they are not, perhaps you should do something about it!) Networking through conferences and meetings of professional associations can give good leads. Internet discussion groups ('Listservs') now form a virtual equivalent. I have found it very heartening to see how, in a list such as EVALTALK (devoted to discussions on evaluation research topics), senior figures in the field often take the time to respond to pleas for help and advice from beginning researchers. Whatever means you use, communicating with people who have done some work in the area often turns up

new sources, perhaps giving you access to unpublished material or to accounts of work in progress.

In personal contacts, you should aim for a symbiotic relationship where you give as well as get. It is discourteous, as well as likely to be counter-productive, to seek to pick other's brains on topics where you have nothing to contribute. If you are new to a field, or indeed to research in general, only network in this way after you have spent time researching the background and have at least some idea of what you might do. You are then less likely to waste others' time, and can throw your own ideas into the discussion. You may even get direct advice.

Some researchers are very cautious about revealing what they are proposing, thinking that others are just waiting to steal their ideas. A colleague seeking permission to carry out a study with the co-operation of hospital consultants was refused permission by one of them who then carried out a very similar study using the same test instruments. Such behaviour is clearly unethical and raises issues about 'whistle-blowing', i.e. whether and how it should be reported (Wenger et al., 1999). Obviously there are situations where you have to be careful, perhaps for reasons of organizational sensitivity, but openness usually pays dividends.

From researching the background in these ways, you go some way towards finding out what is known about the topic, what is seen as problematic, the approaches that have been taken, etc. It helps to get a good feel for this. However, it is all too easy to be imprisoned by what others have done into a particular way of looking at, and of investigating, the topic. Beware.

F Acknowledging the constraints

Any real world study must obviously take serious note of real world constraints. Your choice of research focus must be realistic in terms of the time and resources that you have available. If you have a maximum of three weeks to devote to the project, you choose something where there is a good chance of 'getting it out' in that time. Access and co-operation are similarly important, as well as having a nose for situations where any enquiry is likely to be counter-productive (getting into a sensitive situation involving, say, the siting of a hostel for mentally handicapped adults when your prime aim is to develop community provision is not very sensible if a likely outcome is the stirring up of a hornet's nest). These are themes which will recur throughout our discussions and are particularly important when deciding on the kind of research strategy to be used and the practicalities of actually carrying out the study; but they need to be present, at least in the background, when considering the research focus.

Deciding on the Research Questions

There is no foolproof, automatic way of generating research questions. While the sequence envisaged here, of first deciding on a general research focus or

area, and then refining that down into a small number of relatively specific research questions, has an intuitive reasonableness, things may not work out like this. A question, or questions, may come first – perhaps stimulated by theoretical concerns. You then seek an appropriate context, a research focus, in which to ask the question. More commonly, as indicated above, the general focus comes first.

There is evidence, however, that some ways of approaching the generation of research questions are more likely to result in successful and productive enquiries than others. J. T. Campbell et al. (1982) have looked at these issues by using a range of empirical techniques, including contrasts between studies judged by their originators as being either successful or unsuccessful. Their remit was limited to research in industrial and organizational psychology, but many of their conclusions seem to have general relevance to studies in the social sciences.

An idea that emerges strongly from their work is that the selection of innovative research questions is not a single act or decision. Significant research is a process, an attitude, a way of thinking. Significant research is accomplished by people who are motivated to do significant research, who are willing to pay the cost in terms of time or effort (p. 109).

Box 3.4 lists features considered by researchers to be associated with their successful and unsuccessful projects. Campbell et al. view the choice process for selecting the research questions as being often non-linear and involving considerable uncertainty and intuition. Research starting with mechanistic linear thinking, closely tied to the known and understood, may be clean and tidy but is unlikely to be of any significance. However, something that starts out as poorly understood, given considerable theoretical effort to convert it into something which is clearly defined, logical and rational, could well be of value.

Campbell et al. also conducted a relatively informal interview study with investigators responsible for what are considered important 'milestone' studies in the study of organizations, and reached conclusions which supported their previous ones. Specifically, it did not appear that these milestone studies had arisen simply from seeking to test, or extend, an existing theory previously used in that field of research. In fact, in virtually all cases, the relevant theory or knowledge was imported from some other field. What was clear was that these important studies were driven by some specific problem to be solved; that they were characterized by a problem in search of a technique, rather than the reverse. Each of the researchers was deeply involved in the substantive area of study, and it was interesting to note that many of them reported an element of luck in either the creation or the development of the research problem. However, it is well known in scientific creativity that Lady Luck is more willing to bestow her favours on the keenly involved and well prepared (see e.g. Medawar, 1979, p. 89).

Box 3.4

Features considered by researchers to characterize the antecedents of their successful and unsuccessful research

Successful research develops from:

- 1 *Activity and involvement* Good and frequent contacts both out in the field and with colleagues.
- 2 *Convergence* Coming together of two or more activities or interests (e.g. of an idea and a method; interest of colleague with a problem or technique).
- 3 *Intuition* Feeling that the work is important, timely, 'right' (rather than logical analysis).
- 4 *Theory* Concern for theoretical understanding.
- 5 *Real world value* Problem arising from the field and leading to tangible and useful ideas.

Unsuccessful research starts with:

- 1 *Expedience* Undertaken because it is easy, cheap, quick or convenient.
- 2 *Method or technique* Using it as a vehicle to carry out a specific method of investigation or statistical technique.
- 3 *Motivation by publication, money or funding* Research done primarily for publication purposes rather than interest in the issue.
- 4 *Lack of theory* Without theory the research may be easier and quicker, but the outcome will often be of little value.

(Adapted from Campbell et al., 1982, pp. 97–103.)

Developing the research questions

A Know the area

It obviously helps to be really familiar with the area on which your research focuses. A good strategy to force yourself into this position is to 'go public' in some way – produce a review paper, do a seminar or other presentation with colleagues whose comments you respect (or fear!).

B Widen the base of your experience

You should not be limited by the research (and research questions) current in the specific field you are researching. Researchers in other fields and from other disciplines may well be wrestling with problems similar to yours, or from which useful parallels can be drawn. An afternoon's trawling through journals in cognate disciplines is one way. Contact and discussion with practitioners may give a different perspective on what the questions are.

C Consider using techniques for enhancing creativity

There is a substantial literature on creativity and on methods of promoting innovation which is relevant to the process of generating research questions. Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1995) provide comprehensive coverage. While their text is primarily addressed to engineers, there is much of relevance here to real world researchers. The methods include *brainstorming* (e.g. Tudor, 1992; Rawlinson, 1981); the *nominal group* and *Delphi techniques* (e.g. Delbecq, 1986); and *focus groups*. (see chapter 9 below, p. 284).

Note: The techniques for enhancing creativity are primarily concerned with groups. Even if you are going to carry out the project on an individual basis, there is much to be said for regarding this initial stage of research as a group process and enlisting the help of others.

Consider, for example, the Delphi technique. In this context it might mean getting together a group of persons, either those who are involved directly in the project or a range of colleagues with interests in the focus of the research. (Bear in mind the point made in section B, that there is advantage in including in the group colleagues from other disciplines and practitioners.) Each individual is then asked to generate *independently*, i.e. not in a group situation, say, up to three specific research questions in the chosen area. They may be asked also to provide additional information, perhaps giving a justification for the questions chosen. The responses from each individual are collected, and all responses are passed on in an unedited and unattributed form to all members of the group. A second cycle then takes place. This might involve individuals commenting on other responses, and/or revising their own contribution in the light of what others have produced. Third and fourth cycles might take place, either of similar form or seeking resolution or consensus through voting, or ranking, or categorizing responses. Endacott et al. (1999) and Gibson (1998) provide examples of different uses of the technique.

D Avoid the pitfalls of

- *Allowing a pre-decision on method or technique to decide the questions to be asked.* A variant of this concerning the use of computerized packages for statistical analysis is also worth flagging. Developing research questions *simply* on the basis that they allow the use of a particular package that you have

available is almost as big a research sin as designing and carrying out a fixed research design study that you don't know how to analyse.

- *Posing research questions that can't be answered* (either in general or by the methods that it is feasible for you to use).
- *Asking questions that have already been answered satisfactorily* (deliberate replication resulting from a concern about the status of a finding is different from ignorance of the literature).

E Cut it down to size

Thinking about the focus almost always leads to a set of research questions that is too large and diffuse. Grouping questions together and constructing a hierarchy of sub-questions nested within more general ones helps to bring some order. It is important not to arrive at premature closure, even on a list of questions threatening to get out of hand. What commonly happens is that something like a research programme emerges, which has within it several relatively separate research projects.

However, the time will come when you have to make hard decisions about where your priorities are – and in particular about what is feasible, given the time and other resources that you have available. In fixed designs you need to have done this to a very large extent even before you pilot; the role of the pilot is, among other things, to fine-tune the questions. In flexible design, you keep things much more open when starting data collection. Even here, though, it is wise to have a concern for feasibility at an early stage. The flexibility comes in modifying and developing the questions as data collection and analysis proceeds. An important criterion for such development is getting a better understanding of what is likely to be feasible as the research process continues.

Guidelines for the number of research questions you might be able to address in a single study vary from three to over ten. Obviously this depends on the nature of the specific research questions and the resources at your disposal, but my experience is that very few small-scale real world studies can cope adequately with more than six questions, and that four to six such questions is a fair rule of thumb. Box 3.5 suggests characteristics of good research questions.

F Think in terms of the purposes of your research

Clarifying the purpose or purposes of your research can go a long way towards sorting out the research questions. A tripartite classification is commonly used, distinguishing between *exploratory*, *descriptive* and *explanatory* purposes. Following Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 33) it seems appropriate to add a fourth *emancipatory* category signalling the 'action' perspective present in many real world studies (see also the discussion in chapter 2 above, p. 28). These are summarized in box 3.6. A particular study may be concerned with more than one purpose, possibly all four, but often one will predominate. The purpose may also change as the study proceeds. Box 3.7 gives an example of links between research questions and purpose.

Box 3.5

Good research questions

Good questions are:

- *Clear* They are unambiguous and easily understood.
- *Specific* They are sufficiently specific for it to be clear what constitutes an answer.
- *Answerable* We can see what data are needed to answer them and how those data will be collected.
- *Interconnected* The questions are related in some meaningful way, forming a coherent whole.
- *Substantively relevant* They are worthwhile, non-trivial questions worthy of the research effort to be expended.

(Based on Punch, 1998, p. 49.)

Box 3.6

Classification of the purposes of enquiry

1 *Exploratory*

- To find out what is happening, particularly in little-understood situations.
- To seek new insights.
- To ask questions.
- To assess phenomena in a new light.
- To generate ideas and hypotheses for future research.
- Almost exclusively of flexible design.

2 *Descriptive*

- To portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations.
- Requires extensive previous knowledge of the situation etc. to be researched or described, so that you know appropriate aspects on which to gather information.
- May be of flexible and/or fixed design.

3 *Explanatory*

- Seeks an explanation of a situation or problem, traditionally but not necessarily in the form of causal relationships.

- To explain patterns relating to the phenomenon being researched.
- To identify relationships between aspects of the phenomenon.
- May be of flexible and/or fixed design.

4 *Emancipatory*

- To create opportunities and the will to engage in social action.
- Almost exclusively of flexible design.

Box 3.7

Linking research questions to purpose

In an evaluation of an innovatory reading programme for children with special needs, an *explanatory study* might focus on:

- 1 Do the children read better as a result of this programme?

or

- 2 Do the children read better in this programme compared with the standard programme?

or

- 3 For what type of special need, ability level, class organization or school is the programme effective?

Note: The 'as a result of' in (1) indicates that the concern is whether the programme caused the improvement. Questions (2) and (3) also imply a concern for causation, although this is not explicit. Question (3) is couched in terms of the realist concern for 'what works for whom in what context'.

An *exploratory study* might focus on:

- 4 What is the experience of children following the programme?

Note: With an established, rather than an innovatory, programme it may be that sufficient is known about this question for it to be approached as a *descriptive* task.

A *descriptive study* might focus on:

- 5 What are teachers' views about the programme?

and/or

- 6 To what extent are parents involved in and supportive of the programme?

Note: This is a descriptive task if it is felt that sufficient is known about the dimensions of teachers' likely views, or of parents' involvement, etc. If not, it would be an *exploratory* task. Given the focus of the study, it could also have an *emancipatory* role if the programme helps to extend the abilities of children with special needs; or is shown to enrich their experience; or helps empower their parents or teachers.

A study, with adequate resources, might cover each of these questions, though it is likely that the focus would be primarily on one of these purposes.

(Box 4.4 returns to this example when considering the links between research questions and strategy)

It is taken as given that all enquiry is concerned with *contributing to knowledge*. Real world enquiry also commonly seeks a potential usefulness in relation to policy and practice. The information from J. T. Campbell et al. (1982) and related studies discussed in the previous section provides some practical suggestions for the strategies one might adopt in generating research questions.

The Place of Theory

The findings of J. T. Campbell et al. (1982), summarized in box 3.4, emphasize the value of theory in carrying out quality applied research. Or, as Kurt Lewin put it many years ago, when advising applied social psychologists, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (1951, p. 169). This view is contested. Scriven (1991, p. 360) regards theories as a luxury in evaluation research, while Thomas (1997), writing in the context of education, advocates the abandonment of all theory because of its stifling effect on practice. The view that 'what works' is enough is closely linked to influential 'evidence-based' approaches in many areas (e.g. Hargreaves, 1997; but see Atkinson, 2000 for a spirited defence of the value of theories).

'Theory' can mean very different things to different people. In very general terms it is an explanation of what is going on in the situation, phenomenon or whatever that we are investigating. Theories can range from formal large-scale systems developed in academic disciplines to informal hunches or speculations from laypersons, practitioners or participants in the research.

Obviously, there are advantages if links can be made to current formal theories. This provides some assurances that what you are doing is in tune with other researchers' attempts to understand what is happening. As a result, as well as carrying out a higher-quality study, you may well be able to make some small contribution to the development of theory itself. For example, Johnson (1997; see also Johnson and Robson, 1999) was able to gain a greater understanding of the transition of mature female students into professionally oriented courses of higher education through viewing this process in terms of Breakwell's (1986) theory of 'threatened identities'.

Admittedly, it may well not be feasible to make this kind of symbiotic connection between the research topic and existing theory in many real world studies. The topic may be novel and appropriate theories elusive. Time pressures may be such that there is not the opportunity to do the necessary delving into what is often quite difficult literature. Don't despair. In thinking about the focus of the research, you will develop what amounts to a personal theory about what might be going on and how it might be understood (what Argyris and Schön, 1974, describe as a 'theory-in-use' or 'tacit theory'). There are highly likely to be others around who can help: perhaps staff members, professionals, practitioners, clients who may have had a much longer experience with the situation than you and who, if asked, may have highly pertinent observations about how and why 'it' will or won't 'work'. Again, it will be advantageous if you can move beyond this to more formal theory and concepts, but this is by no means an essential feature of many real world studies.

A distinction is sometimes made between 'theory verification' and 'theory generation' research. Positivist methodology, which has traditionally formed the basis for fixed design experimental studies, starts with a theory, deduces formal hypotheses from it, and designs the study to test these hypotheses. The tradition in much flexible design research, quintessentially in grounded theory studies (see chapter 6), is theory generation. Here researchers do not start with a theory but aim to end up with one, developed systematically from the data collected. However, these connections are by no means universal. Quantitative, fixed design research can be used for theory generation; qualitative, flexible designs for theory verification (Hammersley, 1992). The position taken here is that there is a place for both theory generating and theory verification approaches. Which is most appropriate will depend on the particular circumstances and context of your research. Obviously, if an apparently serviceable theory relevant to your proposed study already exists, the sensible task is to test its utility. If you are casting around for a plausible theory, then theory generation is indicated. What is important is that you have a theory on completion of the study; i.e. you have achieved some understanding about what is going on.

The view that you will have some personal theories, and indeed should seek to make them explicit, is to some extent at odds with the grounded theory

approach which specifies that you start with a clean sheet and that theory should be developed only as and when data are collected. This seems to me unrealistic (although the grounded theory veto on extensive prior literature searching does have its attractions!). Also, in most real world studies time is at a premium and there is advantage in not delaying theory development.

Conceptual frameworks and realist mechanisms

The theory about what is going on, what is happening and why, particularly when expressed in diagrammatic form, is sometimes referred to as a *conceptual framework*. This term is sometimes defined rather more widely, for example as 'the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research' (Maxwell, 1996, p. 25). In my experience, most (though by no means all) researchers new to the game find it very helpful to try to produce such a diagram – and to refine it through discussion and, in flexible designs, as data collection and analysis continue. Figure 3.1 gives examples of different types proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Similar approaches have been suggested by other writers under the headings of *concept maps* (Novak and Gowin, 1984), *integrative diagrams* (Strauss, 1987, p. 170), *systems (or Venn) diagrams* (Blackmore and Ison, 1998, p. 52), and *conceptual modelling* (Blackmore and Ison, 1998, p. 55).

The realist approach, as discussed and exemplified in chapter 2 above, can be used to generate a particular kind of conceptual framework. The task is to specify the various enabling and disabling mechanisms operating in a particular situation, and the contexts relevant to their operation.

A note on replication studies, critical realism, and theory development It may be worthwhile to reiterate the plea made in chapter 2 (p. 42) that you give serious consideration to carrying out some form of replication study. This may be of an earlier study you have carried out, or (assuming you can find one) a relevant study by another researcher. Or, as discussed in chapter 4, you can build replication into your design by having, say, a set of linked case studies which share important characteristics. Attempts to replicate are all too rare in the applied social sciences. This may, in part, be linked to the desire on the part of researchers to do something new and innovative. It could also come from a view that replication, while occupying a central role in the progress of natural science, is not feasible in social science. However, as argued in chapter 2 (p. 41), adoption of a critical realist perspective can provide a sound basis for the use of replication in the development and refinement of theories.

A note on hypotheses Some readers, particularly those with a quantitative background, may be familiar with discussions of research couched in terms of

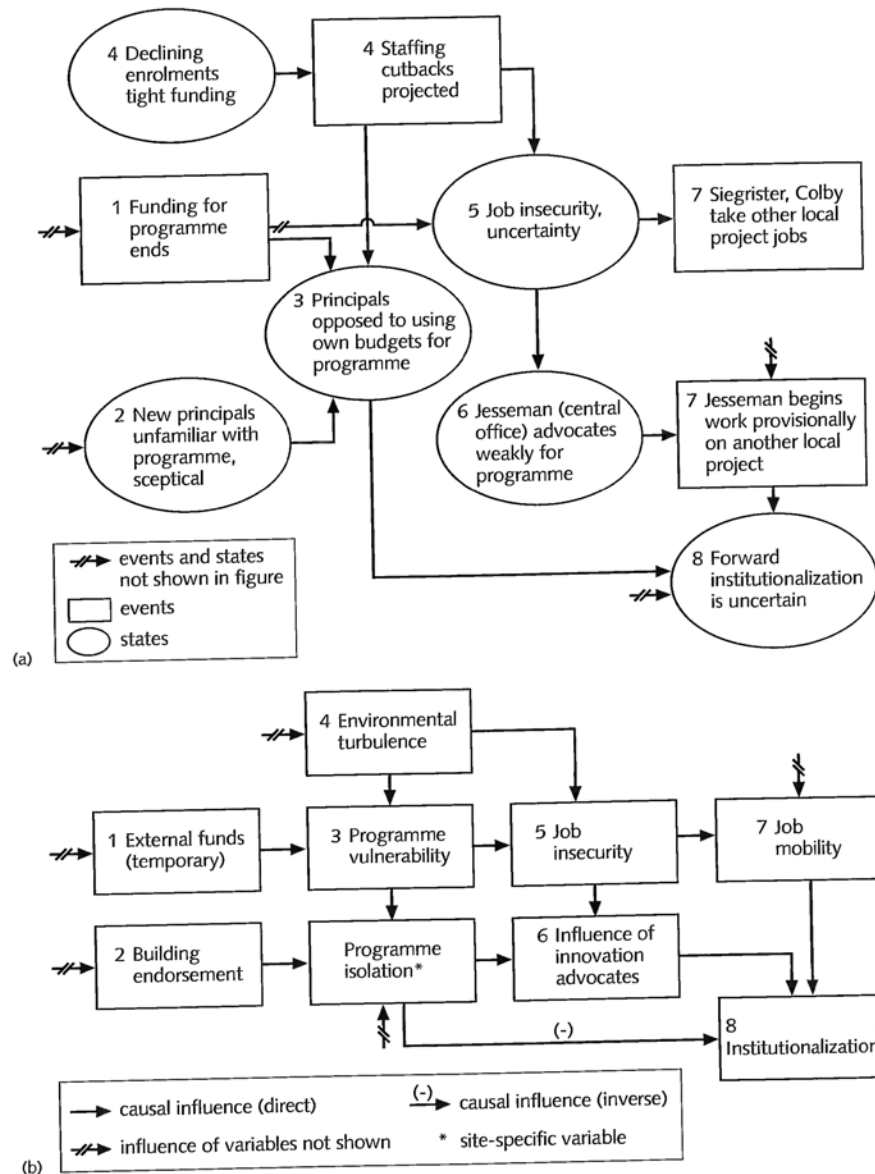


Figure 3.1 Examples of different types of conceptual framework. (a) Excerpt from an event-state network: Perry-Parkdale School. (b) Excerpt from a causal network: Perry-Parkdale School. Source: Miles and Huberman (1994).

hypothesis testing, with detailed definitions of null and alternative hypotheses. As discussed above, this text favours (largely because of its wider applicability) the approach of seeking answers to research questions. Following Punch (1998, pp. 39–41) a simple definition of the hypothesis as the predicted answer to a research question is proposed. A theory (whether expressed in terms of mechanisms or otherwise) explains why a particular answer is predicted. Talking in terms of hypotheses best fits fixed design research, where we should be in a position to make predictions before the data are gathered. In flexible design research, we are likely to be in this position only after, and as a result of, the data gathering. The outcomes can be used to support the existence of particular mechanisms in the context studied, even if they could not be predicted.

Ethical Considerations

Participants in real world studies may sometimes be involved without their knowledge. They may be misled about the true nature of the study. Or they may be faced with situations that cause stress or anxiety. Should they be? In other words, is the investigator acting ethically? Put baldly like this, the answer seems to be clearly: no. However, there is another way of looking at the question. These considerations might be put alongside your time and effort as ‘costs’ of carrying out the enquiry, to be set against ‘benefits’ including the knowledge gained from the study, and possible changes and improvements to situations or services.

These questionable practices arise from the kind of research questions we are asking, and the methods used to seek answers, particularly the procedures used to avoid misleading results. It may be that we can go about things differently and avoid deception, stress and the like. If this is not possible, then there is a conflict. How is our ‘right to know’ balanced against the participants’ right to privacy, dignity and self-determination? And should the investigator act as both judge and jury?

It is vital that, at a very early stage of your preparations to carry out an enquiry, you give serious thought to these ethical aspects of what you are proposing. Ethics refers to rules of conduct; typically, to conformity to a code or set of principles (Reynolds, 1979). Many professions working with people have adopted such codes. Examples include those of the British Psychological Society (2000), British Sociological Association (n.d.), British Association of Social Workers (1996), American Psychological Association (1992), American Sociological Association (1997) and American Educational Research Association (1992). The American Psychological Association has also published (Bersoff, 1999) a useful and stimulating text on ethical conflicts. You should familiarize yourself with the code or codes most relevant to your work, and

ensure that you follow it/them scrupulously. Note that web addresses, where available, have been included in the references to the various codes mentioned above. You should follow these up and ensure that you have the current version.

A distinction is sometimes made between *ethics* and *morals*. While both are concerned with what is good or bad, right or wrong, *ethics* are usually taken as referring to general principles of what one ought to do, while *morals* are usually taken as concerned with whether or not a *specific* act is consistent with accepted notions of right or wrong. For example, a psychologist might punctiliously follow the profession's ethical guidelines but still be accused of behaving immorally. Controversial research on perception in kittens, involving the sewing together of their eyelids, is a case which illustrates this divide sharply. Views about the morality or otherwise of this work depend crucially, of course, on what constitute 'accepted' notions of right and wrong. One position would be that it is simply and absolutely wrong to do this to an animal. An opposing view would seek to balance the costs (to the animal, and possibly to the researcher through adverse publicity) and the benefits (to science, with possible medical or other 'spin-offs').

The terms 'ethical' and 'moral' are subsequently used interchangeably in this text to refer to 'proper' conduct, except where the context makes codified principles relevant. Ethical and moral concerns in scientific studies have come to the fore alongside the changing views of the nature of science discussed in chapter 2. The traditional view was that science was 'value-free' or 'value-neutral', and the task of the scientist simply to describe what *is* in an objective manner. This is a different task from determining what *ought* to be done to behave ethically. If, however, objectivity cannot be guaranteed when doing science, and the values of the researcher are inevitably involved in the research, the worlds of 'is' and 'ought' become much more difficult to disentangle.

Experimental research with people poses ethical problems in sharp forms. Control over what people do obviously has a moral dimension. While this is self-evident in experimental situations, ethical dilemmas lurk in *any* research involving people. In real world research we may not be able to, or wish to, control the situation, but there is almost always the intention or possibility of change associated with the study. This forces the researcher, wittingly or not, into value judgements and moral dilemmas. Suppose we are looking at a new approach to the teaching of reading. It is highly likely that we start with the premise that this looks like being a 'good thing', probably an improvement on what is currently on offer. Life – your own and the participants' – is too short to waste it on something which does not appear to have this 'prima facie' value. A possible exception would be where the latest educational fad was sweeping the schools and a demonstration of its drawbacks might be a useful inoculation for the system – although even in this case, my experience

has been that the conclusion ends up something like: 'If you want to take on this new approach, these are the conditions under which it seems to be most effective.'

Reverting to consideration of the likely 'good' intervention, an immediate issue becomes 'Which schools are to be involved?' Do you choose the fertile soil of a friendly, innovative school? Or the stony ground of a setting where there is probably a greater, though unacknowledged, need for something new? These are partly research issues, but they have a clear ethical dimension.

Ethical problems start at the very beginning of a study. It may appear unethical to select certain foci for research because of the likely exacerbation of an explosive situation simply by carrying out research in that area. Problems continue through into the choice of a venue, and indeed can permeate the whole of a study. For example:

- Is the giving of necessary additional resources of staff, equipment or whatever to the places where the research takes place, simply part of the deal, the investigator showing good faith by giving as well as taking? Or is it unfair coercion to take part, reminiscent of prisoners gaining food or early release for taking part in trials of potentially dangerous drugs?
- Do individuals have the right not to take part? And even if they do, are there any overt or covert penalties for non-participation ('It will look good on your reference if you have taken part in this study')?
- Do they know what they are letting themselves in for? Is their consent 'fully informed'? (Herrera, 1999, and Clarke, 1999, present critiques of the defences sometimes put forward for omitting informed consent.)
- Will individuals participating be protected, not only from any direct effects of the intervention, but also by the investigator ensuring that the reporting of the study maintains confidentiality?
- Is confidentiality, on the other hand, always appropriate? If people have done something good and worthwhile, and probably put in extra effort and time, why shouldn't they get credit for it? Conversely, if inefficiency or malpractice is uncovered in the study, should the investigator let the guilty ones hide?
- What responsibility do investigators have for the knowledge that they have acquired? Are they simply the 'hired hands' doing the bidding of the paymaster? Or – changing the metaphor to one used by Carl Rogers – are they simply ammunition wagons, loaded with powerful knowledge just waiting to be used, whether the users are the 'good guys' or the 'bad guys'? Incidentally, Rogers' (1961) view is: 'Don't be a damn ammunition wagon, be a rifle.' That is, those doing applied studies have to target their knowledge and take responsibility for what they 'hit'.

Each of these issues is complex. Although general guidelines can be given, as in the various codes discussed above, the issues must be carefully thought through in each specific situation.

Consider, for example, whether or not people should always be asked in advance whether they are prepared to take part. It may not be possible or practicable to do this. You may have good grounds for believing that telling them would alter the behaviour you are interested in. But not telling them means that you have taken away their right not to participate.

There are several questions you can ask to help you decide. Will the study involve them doing things they would not otherwise do? If not, it is less of an infringement. So, an observational study of naturally occurring behaviour is less questionable than a field experiment where you contrive something which would not otherwise happen. Not that all experiments are equivalent. One which involved you stalling a car when the traffic lights turn green to study the effects on driver behaviour, while questionable in its own right, is probably less so than a simulated mugging on a tube train to study bystander behaviour. Reasonable things to take into account are the degree of inconvenience, and of likely emotional involvement, to participants. In studies where the judgement is made that prior permission must be sought, it is increasingly the practice to present all potential participants with an 'informed consent' form (see p. 380 below).

However, even this apparently highly ethical procedure can have its pitfalls. In research on socially sensitive topics such as drug abuse or AIDS, it is possible that the investigator would be under legal pressure to disclose all research information, including such signed forms. American investigators have been served with subpoenas requiring their attendance in court, and in a similar situation, journalists have faced prison rather than reveal their sources. Hence, in such situations, it might be preferable to proceed informally, and not use a form as such. More generally, while discussion of ethical principles rightly stresses the potential risks to the participants in the research, researchers themselves, in common with professionals such as hospital staff and teachers, can be at risk. Craig et al. (2000), in a useful discussion of safety in social research, list the following types of potential risk:

- risk of physical threat or abuse;
- risk of psychological trauma or consequences, as a result of actual or threatened violence, or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction;
- risk of being in a compromising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour;
- increased exposure to general risks of everyday life and social interaction: travel, infectious disease, accident.

They provide draft suggestions for a 'code of practice' for the safety of social researchers which are well worth considering, particularly if you are likely to be involved in risky fieldwork situations.

Box 3.8 presents a list of questionable practices in which you might be tempted to indulge. The presumption is that you do not do so, unless in a particular study you can convince yourself, and an appropriate 'ethical committee', that the benefits accruing outweigh the costs. Note that, in particular, the use of deception was formerly widespread in social psychological experimentation. Adair et al. (1985) reported that 'upwards of 81% of studies published in the top social psychological journals use deception in their procedures.' This practice is now called into question, in part because participants appear increasingly to appreciate that they are likely to be deceived, resulting in their non-cooperation (Taylor and Shepperd, 1996). Recent commentators call for the complete outlawing of all forms of deception (Ortmann and Hertwig, 1997).

Ethical committees are now commonplace in many settings. Gregg and Jones (1990) provide suggestions for arrangements and procedures for such

Box 3.8

Ten questionable practices in social research

- 1 Involving people without their knowledge or consent.
- 2 Coercing them to participate.
- 3 Withholding information about the true nature of the research.
- 4 Otherwise deceiving the participant.
- 5 Inducing participants to commit acts diminishing their self-esteem.
- 6 Violating rights of self-determination (e.g. in studies seeking to promote individual change).
- 7 Exposing participants to physical or mental stress.
- 8 Invading privacy.
- 9 Withholding benefits from some participants (e.g. in comparison groups).
- 10 Not treating participants fairly, or with consideration, or with respect.

(Kimmel, 1988 provides further discussion on these issues, together with useful exercises on ethical issues.)

committees. They are not necessarily separate committees; for example ethical considerations may be one of the responsibilities for a more general approving committee whose agreement must be sought before a study is started.

Working with vulnerable groups

There are particular ethical problems associated with working with some groups, such as children, persons with mental handicap or mental disturbance, prisoners and other 'captive' populations (e.g. persons in homes for the aged). The issues are whether such participants can rationally, knowingly and freely give informed consent. In the case of legally under-age children, and others who may not be in a position to appreciate what is involved, the parents or guardians should be asked for their consent (Esbensen et al., 1996, discuss the issues involved in detail). In many cases, the child will be able to appreciate at least something of what is involved and should be asked directly in addition to the parent. Ethical committees or review boards, including laypersons and legal experts as well as experienced researchers, can play a key role in such situations. They are particularly important in studies of relatively powerless groups such as the elderly or homeless.

The use of students on a course (common in many psychological experiments) raises similar issues (Banyard and Hunt, 2000). Indeed, whenever anyone takes part in a study for a 'consideration' of some kind, whether financial or as an explicit or implicit part of their duties or position, there are ethical implications. The situation can lead to researchers and participants taking on employer and employee roles respectively. The 'employer' has to guard against the notion that payment justifies placing the participant at risk. On the 'employee's' side, there is the likely tendency to 'give them whatever I think that I am being paid for'.

Certain styles of real world research carry with them additional ethical implications. For example, 'action research' (discussed in chapter 7) goes beyond the usual concerns for consent, confidentiality and respect for the participants' interests covered in the preceding discussion. There is a commitment to genuine participation in the research to the extent that this is seen as a collaborative effort between researcher and 'researched'. Ethical guidelines for this type of research, as presented for example by Kemmis and McTaggart (1981, pp. 43-4) bring the need for negotiation with participants to the fore.

General ethical responsibilities

Real world research can lead to the researcher finding out about practices or conduct which present ethical dilemmas. In the most serious cases you dis-

cover something illegal, such as sexual or physical abuse of children. This must be reported to the police or other appropriate authority. The requirement to report over-rides any confidentiality agreements you have made (in situations where it is known that laws may be broken, it may be sensible to make it clear at the outset that you will have to report illegal acts).

Other situations, while not revealing illegal or unlawful activities, may cause concern. Suppose that in an office, school or hospital setting, you observe serious and persistent bullying by someone in a position of power; or that people are being put at physical or other risk by someone's dereliction of duty. There are no general rules applying to all such situations. In the first instance, they should be discussed with research supervisors or colleagues. If they concur with your assessment of the seriousness of what you have found, and with the need for action, then this will have to be taken up formally with your contacts in the organization or an appropriate senior figure. This may mean that you will have to withdraw from any involvement with the people involved.

An alternative scenario might be that after further thought and discussion you come to the view that what initially disturbed you may be accepted and commonplace in the setting, and perhaps that you are seeking to impose your own values and expectations, whereas the ethical course is to try to seek an understanding of what is going on by 'telling it as it is'. Remember that while you have particular ethical responsibilities as a researcher, this does not mean that you have a privileged voice on what constitutes ethical behaviour in others.

Ethical reporting of research

A further agenda of ethical issues arises in connection with the research report. This is discussed in chapter 15 below (p. 501).

Values in research

The above discussion of ethics has touched on values at several points. This is inevitable because values and value judgements are closely linked to morals and moral judgements. In the traditional positivist view, science and scientists are 'value free', facts and values are fundamentally different, and scientific research which is based on facts arising from empirical data has no role in making value judgements.

As discussed in chapter 2 (p. 21) the positivist position has been largely discredited. This is in part because of successful critiques of the notion of value-free science by philosophers of science as well as feminist and critical theorists. Where this leaves the position of values in social research is disputed.

Even traditional positivist researchers would accept that the actual choice of a research project and the kind of research questions asked involves value judgements. A topic is chosen because it is viewed as more worthwhile than another. Defining, say, the use of soft drugs as a social problem with high priority for research resources indicates a particular set of values. The recommendations for action or practice arising from evaluation research similarly contain value judgements.

The argument is more about the position of values in the actual conduct, analysis and interpretation of social research. Some regard the attempt to differentiate facts and values as misconceived. Others, while accepting the value-laden nature of what are taken to be facts, seek to establish and state explicitly when value judgements are being made. Viewing sweeping judgements (on the part of the researcher) about something being 'good' or 'bad', 'effective' or 'ineffective' as suspect is itself a value judgement. However, it is a position not difficult to defend as part of the 'scientific attitude' discussed in chapter 2 (p. 18).

Politics and social research

Acknowledging that values and value judgements are involved in various ways in the process of social research provides a basis for the argument that such research is political. Hammersley (1995, ch. 6) provides a clear and detailed analysis of the question 'Is social research political?' He discusses four ways in which values are implicated in research:

- The research commitment to producing knowledge – i.e. the presupposition that knowledge is to be preferred to ignorance – shows that, in a fundamental sense, research cannot be value free or politically neutral.
- Research requires resources. Given that they could be used for other purposes, allocating them to research represents a political and value choice.
- Research is founded upon presuppositions reflecting the values of the researcher which may derive, for example, from their gender and ethnicity.
- Research has effects on people's lives through their being involved in the research and/or being in a context affected by the research findings. Ethical concerns about such possible consequences provide another route whereby the researcher's values influence the research.

Such features are not specific to research. They are characteristic of many human activities which therefore have a similar political dimension. The point

is worth stressing, however, when views of science as value free or value neutral still linger.

A second way in which social research may be considered as political arises from the view of politics as to do with the exercise of power. Whether or not researchers were ever autonomous, simply following their own noses uninfluenced by any external forces, is questionable. In the current climate in many countries, those with power influence virtually all aspects of the research process from the choice of research topic (controlled by which projects get funding or other resources) to the publication of findings. This is typically viewed as a malign corrupting influence. The line taken in this text (see chapter 1, p. 11) is that, while there are undoubtedly dangers in this situation, if it is unavoidable you should not waste time and effort trying to avoid it; and that there are advantages to a more inclusive, participatory style of research where working to an agreed shared agenda with sponsors and others in positions of power increases the possibility of research being more useful and more widely used. Some specific influences to be watched out for are covered in box 3.9.

Do researchers themselves have power? Yes – but not a lot. The claim is that because they have specialist expertise, their voice and their findings should command attention. This privileged position is disputed by constructionists and others taking a relativist stance (see chapter 2, p. 25). As discussed in that chapter, the realist position is that researchers can claim only limited and fallible authority in relation to the production of knowledge (see also Hammersley, 1995, p. 107; also Hammersley and Scarth, 1993, which discusses instances of researchers exceeding the boundaries of their authority). Their power is also limited by the fact that research findings are not a major contributor to the development of public policy and that, in general, the impact of research is weak (this issue is discussed in more detail in chapter 7, p. 219).

Political issues come into sharpest focus in evaluation research, and are discussed in greater detail in this context (see chapter 7, p. 210).

Sexism and social research

Feminist commentators and researchers have made a convincing case for the existence of sexist bias in research. This is seen in all areas of science, including the natural sciences (e.g. Harding and Hintikka, 1983), but is obviously of great concern in the social sciences where the human, in one or both genders, is the enquirer and the enquired-upon. There is now a substantial literature on this area (e.g. Harding, 1987; Roberts, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Smith, 1987; Hollway, 1989; Eichler, 1980; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Neilsen, 1990; Reinhartz, 1992).

Box 3.9

Political influences on research

The person(s) or agencies sponsoring, funding or otherwise providing resources, access or facilities for the research may influence some or all of the following:

- 1 *Selection of research focus* Not a problem providing that you consider the project feasible and ethical. Decisions about the topics which will receive funding is strongly influenced by policy and ideological considerations.
- 2 *Selection of research design (research questions, strategy, methods etc.)* Again, not a problem providing that you consider the design feasible and ethical. It may be important to fall in with their preferences (e.g. for a fixed or flexible design) as this could influence the utilization of findings.
- 3 *Granting of access* A problem only when access is refused, which may be due to fear of exposure, general dislike or distrust of research and researchers, and/or previous unfortunate experiences with projects. Rare when funded by the organization involved.
- 4 *Publication of findings* Can cause severe problems. It is important that this is clarified in the contract or agreement made when starting the project. This should cover both their and your rights of publication (including who has final control over the content and whether they can prohibit your separate publication). You must decide at the outset whether the conditions are acceptable. Jenkins (1984) provides a graphic example of how things can go wrong. Journal publication is strongly influenced by dominant ideologies and powerful interest groups.
- 5 *Use made by sponsor of findings* This is likely to be outside your control. Findings may be misrepresented, used partially or suppressed totally. Provided this falls within the terms of the contract or agreement, you just put this down to experience. Or you may even get a publication discussing what happened!

Note: Knowledge that a research project has been sponsored by a particular agency may affect the *credibility* of its findings (e.g. a study funded by a pharmaceutical company on the environmental effects of genetically modified organisms will have low credibility with some audiences). There is undoubtedly the possibility that funded researchers will, wittingly or unwittingly, produce 'favourable' results. If you consider the project worthwhile and can live with criticism, your responsibility if you proceed is to guard against bias and generally observe all ethical considerations.

Eichler (1988), in a clear and readable analysis applicable to all social science disciplines, suggests that sexism in research arises from four 'primary problems': androcentricity, overgeneralization, gender insensitivity and double standards. She also argues that there are three further problems, which, while logically derived from and falling within the primary problems, occur so frequently as to merit separate identification: sex appropriateness, familism and sexual dichotomism. Box 3.10 gives an indication of the meaning of these terms.

Box 3.10

Sexism in research: sources of bias

- 1 *Androcentricity* Viewing the world from a male perspective: e.g. when a test or other research instrument is developed and tested on males, and then assumed to be suitable for use with females. Note that *gynocentricity* (viewing the world from a female perspective) is, of course, also possible, though relatively rare.
- 2 *Overgeneralization* When a study deals with only one sex but presents itself as generally applicable: e.g. a study dealing solely with mothers which makes statements about parents. *Overspecificity* can also occur when single-sex terms are used when both sexes are involved; e.g. many uses of 'man', either by itself or as in 'chairman'.
- 3 *Gender insensitivity* Ignoring sex as a possible variable: e.g. when a study omits to report the sex of those involved.
- 4 *Double standards* Evaluating, treating or measuring identical behaviours, traits or situations by different means for males and females: e.g. using female-derived categories of social status for males (or vice versa). This may well be not inappropriate in a particular study, but nevertheless could lead to bias which should be acknowledged.
- 5 *Sex appropriateness* A common form of 'double standards': e.g. that child rearing is necessarily a female activity.
- 6 *Familism* A particular instance of 'gender insensitivity'. Consists of treating the family as the smallest unit of analysis when it would be possible and appropriate to treat an individual as the unit.
- 7 *Sexual dichotomism* Another instance of 'double standards': treating the sexes as two entirely distinct social groups rather than as groups with overlapping characteristics.

(Adapted from Eichler, 1988.)

This analysis covers a much wider range of issues than the use of sexist language. It is now generally accepted that such language should be avoided when reporting research, as discussed in chapter 15 (p. 503).

Problems arising from sexism can affect all aspects and stages of the research process, and both female and male readers and researchers are urged to be on their guard. Eichler (1988, pp. 170–5) provides a comprehensive ‘Nonsexist Research Checklist’ giving examples of how the various problems arise in the concepts employed in the research, its design, methods, data interpretation, etc.

Further Reading

- Ballenger, B. (1998) *The Curious Researcher*, 2nd edn. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. The early sections (‘The First Week’ and ‘The Second Week’) provide many practical tips for getting started with a ‘research paper’ but equally relevant to a project. Very down-to-earth.
- Becker, H. S. (1998) *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You’re Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Howard Becker shows once again that it is possible to be a sociologist and write clearly and accessibly. Presents a set of techniques for helping you to think about research projects.
- Hall, D. and Hall, I. (1996) *Practical Social Research: Project Work in the Community*. London: Macmillan. First chapter gives helpful advice on undertaking small applied projects based on participation with local groups and emphasizing an ethical basis.
- Homan, R. (1991) *The Ethics of Social Research*. London: Longman. Readable and thorough analysis of ethical issues. Seeks to keep open the debate between covert and overt methods of social research.
- Newman, D. L. and Brown, R. D. (1996) *Applied Ethics for Program Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage. Provides a practical framework for ethical decision-making by practitioners. Gives a range of practical dilemmas.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1994) *The Morals and Politics of Psychology: Psychological Discourse and the Status Quo*. New York: State University of New York Press. Deals with the social ethics of psychology. Argues that applied psychology strengthens the societal status quo, hence contributing to the perpetuation of social injustice. Raises important issues that many choose to ignore.
- Thomas, A. et al., eds (1998) *Finding Out Fast: Investigative Skills for Policy and Development*. London: Sage. Highly practical guide to carrying out policy-oriented research when time is short and resources are limited.

Part II

Designing the Enquiry

It is useful to distinguish between the *strategy* and the *tactics* you adopt when carrying out an enquiry. Strategy refers to the general broad orientation taken in addressing research questions – the style, if you like. These strategic considerations are the major concern of this second part of the book. Tactics, the specific methods of investigation, are dealt with in Part III.