Introduction

With the enormous growth in recent years of a research culture in public life, or perhaps more specifically an evidence-based and evaluation culture, more and more people are called upon to undertake social research. Social research can appear bewildering for first-time researchers, whether they are students or those who must undertake research as part of their jobs. When is a survey appropriate, or when are depth interviews better? How big should a sample be? When is a finding 'significant', etc., etc.? The aim of this book is to help those who must undertake social research (willingly or perhaps reluctantly) to make sense of these things.

What is social research?

Social research is the means by which social scientists understand, explain and predict the social world. Social researchers may have a background in one (or more) substantive areas of social science, such as economics, social policy, human geography, sociology or political science. Increasingly, though, many who become social researchers do not have any specialist social science background, but may have received their social research training after graduating in quite a different area, or they may have learnt 'on the job'. Researchers are not just academics and many work for local or national government, health services, charities or campaigning organizations and in market research.

What we call social research covers a wide range of activities from theoretically driven 'pure' research, to the pragmatic and varying tasks carried out by researchers in the community. The former may be doing very sophisticated research, perhaps developing neural networks to model the social world (Byrne, 2002: Chapter 8), while the latter might be conducting focus groups on attitudes to local healthcare plans. In this respect the scope of social research from the esoteric to the everyday mirrors that of the science–technology continuum. Yet in the same way that theoretical physics and mechanical engineering each depend on the principles of natural science, so it is that all social research from the most complex to the most mundane depends on certain principles and techniques. These have their origins in substantive disciplines such as statistics, sociology and anthropology and while researchers may not study these disciplines directly, to learn about social research is to learn some of the fundamentals of social science.

To do basic social research is not difficult, though even in its simplest form it does take us beyond common sense and obvious everyday explanations. One

way in which it is different to natural science and technology is that taxi drivers rarely give you the benefit of their views on the second law of thermodynamics, or on the Planck Constant, but they will tell you that a return of the death penalty will reduce crime, or that single mothers are a financial burden on the state. In these and many other things common sense is either wrong, or in need of modification. Society needs social researchers as much as it needs engineers. The latter can tell us how to build structurally sound bridges, roads, power stations and apartment blocks, but it is social researchers who can tell us about the need for such things and their likely social impact. Common sense, whether that of taxi drivers, politicians or even the media, is not enough and to rely on it for policy-making, or even local community planning, may prove costly. In the 1950s and 1960s British urban housing policy was dominated by the move to build large quantities of high rise high density housing. The policy was mostly the result of well-intentioned political rhetoric, but even by the late 1960s it was becoming clear that it was a mistaken policy and was leading to social problems, many of which remain with us today (Jephcott, 1971; Murie, 1983; Coleman, 1990). As is so often the case, it was social researchers who were called in to describe and explain these problems.

Not all research is about solving 'social' problems. Some research is about aspects of the puzzles have occupied humans since the time of the ancient Greeks: what are we like, and how can we know the social world? Sometimes knowing a bit more about the social world helps us to resolve the practical problems of living in it and sometimes knowing more about the practical problems of, say, poverty or poor housing throws light on what individuals and groups are like. The resolution of these problems requires curiosity, indeed curiosity is a precondition of all science. Knowledge, in any subject, is not derived from a neutral aggregation of 'facts', but as a result of active seeking, or error and the elimination of error. The resolution of one problem, or set of problems, creates a new batch of problems. As the philosopher Karl Popper put it:

> Every solution of a problem raises new unsolved problems; this more so the deeper the original problem and the bolder its solution. The more we learn about the world, and the deeper our learning, the more conscious, specific; and articulate will be our knowledge of what we do not know, our knowledge of our ignorance. (Popper, 1989: 29)

Popper's message was that while there is a limit to our knowledge, there is no limit to our ignorance, yet despite this to thrive, or indeed survive, we continue to push out the boundaries of our knowledge, to get nearer and nearer 'the truth'. For me this is the spirit of research; it is critical, yet optimistic activity that provides me with a never ending source of puzzles.

Researching *social* life

Of course much of the foregoing would apply equally to research in the natural sciences and although there is a powerful argument which says the

natural and social sciences do not sharply divide, either in terms of method or concerns, there is something special about social life that makes the job of a social researcher different to that of, say, an experimental physicist. Social life consists of complex feedback mechanisms between individuals and groups and vice versa. This leads to enormous complexity, but of course such complexity is present in the natural world, as are feedback mechanisms. It is the nature of the feedback mechanisms that is different (Eve et al., 1997; Byrne, 1998). Humans have the ability to reflect upon information and act creatively upon it. This produces the dynamic of social life, the subtle and complex arrangements of action and structure that Anthony Giddens (1984) has termed 'structuration'. Now if the actions of one individual or group can lead another individual or group to change what it is they are doing, then this has implications for researching individuals or groups. In social research, as in any area of science, the act of our investigation will have an impact upon the environment investigated, but for us it is the scale of that potential effect that is at issue. In other words, social researchers are themselves agents of change in the world. These changes may be effected by the research act itself, or as a result of the findings becoming known. Opinion polls showing that a presidential candidate's ratings are improving can lend a credibility to a campaign that might have been lacking hitherto.

Although social research transcends common sense and everyday views of the world, it nevertheless contains political and ethical issues that cannot be avoided. These will range from the choice of topic A rather than B in the first place, to how the research is conducted and how it is reported. Research is never neutral and there is always a context. This does not mean, however, that it cannot be objective and indeed moral or political commitment is often an important precursor to good research. A concern for equal opportunities often underlies rigorous research on how those opportunities are not realized. People who research homelessness often begin from a position of seeing homelessness as an evil, as do those who research poverty or substance abuse. We are then curious citizens who are interested in and care about the social world in which we live.

That this world is social, rather than a world of disconnected autonomous individuals, is likewise important. Psychologists, while not ignoring the nature of the external world, are nevertheless concerned with individual consciousness. Social researchers (and more generally social scientists) are concerned about the nature of relationships between people. Social researchers are concerned with individuals, but only as socially situated agents. This is part of a more strategic positioning that makes certain theoretical or philosophical assumptions about the social world; more specifically it is the connection between 'grand theory' and empirical social science, mediated through a further body of knowledge or set of assumptions that constitutes the substantive social science disciplines to which I referred above. Research on the economy will be motivated by a body of economic theory, which in turn will rest upon certain assumptions about humans as economic agents. Social research, though united by many principles, practices and techniques is nevertheless grounded in theoretical positions that

often lie at the heart of substantive disciplines. It begins then from a set of theoretical, moral and political assumptions about human society which pose problems, or puzzles to be solved. A further important ingredient might be termed authenticity: are the conclusions we reach an honest answer to the problem we began with? Do we believe ourselves?

Social research, particularly that presented statistically, is sometimes derided as just political rhetoric, a cynical manipulation of data to produce conclusions conducive to a particular viewpoint. That this happens is certainly true, though more often than not such data have resulted from honest social research, but have been misused by politicians, journalists and policy-makers. Perhaps more common is 'weak' social research that draws unwarranted conclusions from its data. The first is certainly dishonest, the second maybe, but is just as likely to be the result of poor training and lack of rigour.

Honesty is, of course, a state of mind, but fortunately there are third party guarantees that the researcher has indeed been honest. Such guarantees come in a commitment to rigour in method and part of that rigour is a transparency about how the research has been conducted. The very best social research is rigorous and seeks an honest answer to the problem. This means that the methods themselves should be the best known practical means to tackle the research problem. In this book I will maintain the position that this inevitably leads to a methodological pluralism, that the problem will dictate the method and that each method will have advantages and limitations. A key skill of being a good researcher is to recognize these advantages and limitations and to select the best methodological approach, though of course like most skills this is one that is born of experience.

Methodological approaches

Some writers list many different types of social research (e.g. Sarantakos, 1998: 6) and this is quite legitimate but, for the purposes of clarity, to begin with I will speak of only two broad approaches, that is quantitative research and qualitative research. While these broad approaches can be sub-divided and thought of in numerous ways, the difference between these is underwritten by quite different assumptions about knowledge of the social world and how we go about research. Of course, like all categories these can be subverted and it can be shown that there are qualitative aspects to quantitative research and vice versa. But that is for later.

Quantitative research is about quantities. It is about measurement, saying how much of something there is, about explaining why something happened and perhaps predicting under what circumstances it might happen in the future. Most, though not all, quantitative research is conducted at a 'macro' level, that is, it is interested in explaining and predicting aggregate behaviour and characteristics. Quantitative research is rooted in the scientific tradition of studies of the social world and depends on statistical and

mathematical techniques. The principal form of quantitative method is the social survey, though experiments and 'quasi experiments' are also used (see Chapter 5).

Qualitative research is conversely about the qualities things have. It mostly originates in a different tradition in the humanities (though many believe this does not preclude it being scientific, see Hammersley, 2000). The important characteristic of qualitative research is that it is about interpreting and coming to understand the social world at a micro-level. Research is usually with small groups or individuals and aims to understand intentions, meanings and actions. The techniques of this approach include unstructured in-depth interviewing, group interviewing and observation.

In the following chapters I will discuss the underlying thinking behind these methods, how they developed and what their strengths and limitations are. However, first, let me end this Introduction by saying something about how the book is organized and how you might use it.

The book: who should read it, what's in it and how to use it

In writing a book of this kind the author always wants the widest possible audience, if for no other reason than the desire for bigger royalty cheques! In this I am no different, but I do nevertheless believe that 'one size fits all' is not a good idea for methods books. The book is introductory, but it goes a bit further than some introductions and not so far as others. It is aimed at professionals who find that they are confronted with a need to do research and it is aimed at undergraduates and graduates for whom research methods will be a fairly significant part of their training. I have tried to write the book in a direct and accessible way, avoiding jargon as much as I can and because the publisher would not let me write a 200,000 word book, where I have only given a small amount of space to a topic, I try to direct the reader to more detailed texts.

Using this book

I would be delighted of course if the reader sat down in her favourite chair, with a favourite snack and maybe a glass of something and read this book cover to cover. But I know that, like me, most people rarely get a chance to do that kind of thing and are more likely to use text books as resources. Certainly more will be derived from this book if you are actively engaged in research, in which case you might need to dip into particular chapters just to get a feel for an issue of immediate concern. Nevertheless the order of the book pretty much mirrors the direction of the research process, with a couple of exceptions. Interpretive research (Chapter 3) may well come after survey research in multi-method studies and research design (Chapter 9) is intentionally later in the book for reasons explained there.

Structure of the book

Chapter 1 *Science and Commitment in Social Research:* The relationship of social research to science and commitment. The positivist–humanist debate and methodological pluralism. The role of values and an argument for objectivity.

Chapter 2 *From Question to Method:* Where research questions come from and their relationship to theory. Building and testing theories and their 'operationalization' into research. Realism and social research.

Chapter 3 *Research as Interpretation:* Qualitative approaches as interpretive method. The possibilities and limitations of interpretivism. Key approaches in field research, depth interviewing and focus groups.

Chapter 4 *Selecting and Sampling:* The principles of selecting and sampling. Probability and non-probability samples in survey research. Sampling and selecting in interpretivism.

Chapter 5 *Survey Research:* Types of survey and methods of data collection and principal methods of data collection. Quality issues in surveys.

Chapter 6 *Questionnaire Design:* Question context, content and appearance. Asking about attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. Question wording and layout, types of question. Piloting questionnaires.

Chapter 7 *Analysing Survey Data:* Cases and variables. Introduction to probability, measures of central tendency and dispersion. Analysis with one variable. Analysis with two variables, contingency tables and elaboration. Statistical significance and hypothesis testing. Correlation, regression and analysis with three or more variables.

Chapter 8 *The Ethics of Social Research:* Ethics and their importance in research. Decisions about what is ethical research. The avoidance of harm and deception. Issues of privacy and informed consent.

Chapter 9 *Designing Research:* Design decisions and strategies. Resources and research. Multi-method research and triangulation. Ten questions to ask when designing research.

Chapter 10 *Reporting Findings:* Disseminating research results. Audiences and ways of reporting research. Styles of presentation and what can and cannot be claimed.

I have tried to tread a path between the discursive and the illustrative throughout the book. Some things about social research can be communicated in a how to do or how not to do things. Social research *is* about doing, so there is a lot of that. But I also think that the discursive is important,

because there is much in social research that is contentious. I, like every other writer on the subject, will not be giving you a neutral account, a workshop manual, but a personal view of what research is like and what is important. For this reason I have stuck to the traditional practice of concluding each chapter with a conclusion, but to help the reader with orientation and to make the book look nicer, I have also incorporated the following:

- Each chapter begins with a short summary of contents.
- In each chapter I've inserted brief research examples in boxes to illustrate the issues discussed in the text. These should be seen only as 'tasters' and it is recommended that where possible the original source is consulted. Indeed, in such short cameos it would be impossible to thoroughly describe all of the intentions, methods and results of the research.
- Each chapter ends with some discussion points, questions to consider or things to do. The ways these are done might vary from individual mental contemplation to group or 'workshop' exercises.
- Also at the end of each chapter there are a few recommended readings that carry the subject matter of the chapter a little further. These are very much personal recommendations and you may find other books that you consider more helpful.
- Finally, although I have explained most terms used either in the text or in chapter end notes, the reader may find it useful to acquire a copy of W. Paul Vogt's splendid *Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology* (1998).