Introduction

This book is concerned with introducing students and researchers to the ideas and issues that are associated with research practice. It assumes that the primary motivating force driving such people is the pursuit of knowledge – asking questions about some aspect of the social world that we are interested in, and collecting empirical evidence in an attempt to further our understanding of the matter.

But where do such questions come from? The questions may be theoretically informed. Put another way, they may be the result of our desire to test out – or challenge – existing explanations for issues that we are interested in. Alternatively, and at a more immediate level, the issues that may preoccupy the student or researcher may be policy oriented. They may originate in a concern that we have in our own day-to-day life. This may, perhaps, be a problem at work or in our local community.

Irrespective of where the questions come from, our task as researchers is to seek evidence to answer them. If we are to conclude that an existing theory is a credible one or that it is lacking in some respect, then we shall need to demonstrate that our conclusions are supported by evidence. Not to do so would lead others to dispute our claims about the explanatory power of the theory that we are examining. In the same way, an initiative that has been proposed to resolve an issue at work is likely only to be sanctioned if it can be demonstrated that it is likely to achieve the desired effect. Without evidence to indicate the feasibility and predicted impact of the plan, such support is not likely to be forthcoming.

So, what are the approaches that are available to the researcher to answer such questions? Social research is diverse. There is no unanimity on which methods best serve the purpose of answering questions about the social world. Indeed, there is significant disagreement among social researchers as to what should count as knowledge about a particular issue in the first place. In this book we shall address such issues – and others – by asking the questions:

- What is social research, and why do we conduct it?
- What are the different general positions that are taken concerning what is and what is not acceptable knowledge about the social world?
- What are the different general positions that are taken concerning what are and what are not acceptable methods for acquiring such knowledge? The primary debate concerns the relative merits and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research styles. But to what extent is it possible to combine methods in a single research study?

- Can – and should – social research ever be objective and value-free?
- How can we ensure that our research methods are reliable?
- How do we attain validity in our research?
- How can we be assured that our research is ethically sound?
- What are the constraints that we face in carrying out our research study, and to what extent do these serve to shape the course of our research, and impact upon our findings?
- What are the possible consequences of our research project, and how might it affect the world around us – in particular the individuals, group, culture or organisation that we are studying?

It is the intention of this book to prepare people for their research, whether this is for a Masters dissertation or an academic or practitioner research project. By considering these and related questions, you will be in a much stronger position to reflect critically upon your intended research and, in doing so, to develop strategies for conducting your project that are more feasible, manageable and appropriate than if you had not read our book.

Approach

The focus of the book involves examining the alleged dichotomy of research 'styles' (quantitative and qualitative) which permeates and tends to guide research practice. These research styles are set within their philosophical, political and practical contexts. The book considers different models through which research is conceptualised and operationalised, and covers problem formulation and the 'design' or 'logic' that underlies research studies. There is then a consideration of a range of methods for collecting and analysing different forms of data. Finally, there is a focus on issues in developing research proposals for dissertation approval and for applying to external funding bodies.

Throughout the book, there is an emphasis on the need to adopt a critical and reflexive approach to research. This is one in which the researcher is involved in a process of constant renegotiation of strategy, pays particular attention to the social, political and ethical contexts and consequences of the research, and is aware of the cultural assumptions that she or he brings to the research.

At the end of each chapter there is a research task for you to carry out. There are two key related objectives to these exercises. First, they should assist you in gaining a full appreciation of the ideas and issues covered in each chapter. Secondly, the awareness and sensitivity to methodological issues that you acquire should help you to develop research projects that are sophisticated, critical and reflexive.

The first chapter is concerned with introducing students and researchers to the ideas and issues that are associated with research practice. It assumes that the primary motivating force driving such people is the pursuit of

knowledge – asking questions about some aspect of the social world that we are interested in, and collecting empirical evidence in an attempt to further our understanding of the matter. Yet there is little agreement about the status of different sources and forms of evidence, or of how to acquire it. As we shall see, the chief protagonists here are, on the one hand, social researchers who follow a broadly positivist approach in their work, claiming that the social world can be studied 'scientifically', where the aim is to uncover laws which explain human behaviour. On the other hand, a second interpretivist tradition suggests that we can only account for human behaviour if we are able to understand the motives and intentions that underpin human action. For some, the position that is taken here will largely determine the approach taken in the conduct of a research project. However, the chapter also considers the possibilities for combining different approaches and methods in the same research project through a process commonly referred to as 'triangulation'. Advocates of this multi-methods strategy would argue that this is helpful for researchers in seeking to reduce the impact of personal bias and maximise validity in research.

While positivism and interpretivism represent the two dominant research perspectives, there is also a third approach to social research that is broadly called critical social research. In Chapter 2 we shall look at the characteristics of a critical approach to social research by focusing on two significant contributions: those that come under the banners of *feminist methodology* and *emancipatory disability research*. We shall start by locating the case for critical social research within the tradition of critical research as developed by the Frankfurt School, before going on to examine the main features that distinguish both radical feminist and disability research approaches. Some of these, such as the appropriateness of emancipatory research goals and debates around objectivity and subjectivity, are common to both feminist and disability research. However, where debates among feminist researchers have tended to focus predominately on the appropriateness of particular methods and epistemological issues around the status of knowledge claims, emancipatory disability researchers have given greater attention to the distinction between emancipatory and participatory research approaches and issues of control within the research process. We shall also address some of the criticisms that have been levelled at emancipatory and critical social researchers and consider the general methodological implications that can be drawn from this debate.

In Chapter 3 we shall focus upon what is often considered to be a relatively practical aspect in research – *research design*. Typically, this is associated with the notion that there are various stages that research goes through, from taking a theory, focusing upon different aspects of it, devising clearly formulated and expressed research problems, designing appropriate research tools for collecting data, and then, having analysed the findings, drawing conclusions which are written up in a research report or academic paper. But readers are introduced to the notion that research design is much more than this. It is not a linear

process, but rather it is cyclical and ongoing, or *iterative*. Furthermore, in designing a research project, researchers should consider the various constraints that may impinge upon social science investigations, and the role of values, politics and power in research.

All research raises ethical issues that have the potential to impact at *every* stage of the research process and within any research project. In Chapter 4 we shall consider the ways in which major ethical issues impinge upon research using quantitative methods such as survey and experimental research, as well as observation, ethnography and documentary research. We shall identify the principles that help to differentiate ethical research from unethical research, and consider some of the important debates that have taken place in recent years, such as that between the supporters and opponents of 'covert' research. In reviewing the ethical 'ground rules' that frame research inquiry, we shall also consider the new *Research Governance* paradigm introduced by the UK government in recent years. The use of information published in various formats on the Internet forms the basis of a discussion around ethical issues in online research, focusing in particular on the blurred distinction between categorisation of online and offline data. We shall also seek to address the key question that is posed when carrying out social research – do the ends (research findings) always justify the means? It is intended that the chapter will encourage readers to think about some of the problems that are inherent in studying human behaviour, to assess critically the ways in which other researchers have carried out their research, and to prepare them for any possible criticism of their own research in the future.

In Chapter 5 we shall examine what constitutes a document and how social researchers classify the different types of document that are used in the research process. We shall also look at the way in which different epistemologies impact on the use to which documents are put in the research process. This will be followed by a discussion of the general merits of documentary research before taking a more detailed look at the main documentary sources that are used. Attention will be brought to some general problems that arise when conducting documentary research. Within this chapter, official statistics are given special attention because of their wide but often controversial usage within the social sciences. The very substantial benefits of official statistics are discussed while drawing attention to a consideration of their weaknesses. Most importantly, we shall examine the claim that official statistics often employ unexamined assumptions about social life which social science researchers may inherit and reproduce in their studies if they do not guard against them. Finally, we look at other sources of quantitative data available for secondary analysis. We shall pay particular attention to how data quality and validity must be evaluated, with particular attention to the issues which arise from using data created by others.

We focus on the main quantitative methods that are used in research – sample surveys and experiments – in Chapter 6. There is an explicit connection with many

of the issues that are raised in Chapter 1, where the quantitative–qualitative debate is first encountered. The logic of quantitative research is set out – to *explain* social phenomena (why people behave in the way they do, or hold certain views and values) by reference to underlying *causes*. This emphasis on the search for causal connections between different phenomena (or variables) tends to steer researchers working within this tradition towards favouring highly structured research approaches and techniques such as experiments and questionnaire-based sample surveys. The chapter examines the use of both methods, some of their advantages and disadvantages, and the issues that arise by their use. Design issues and techniques in experiments and sample surveys are reviewed (types of method used, differing sampling strategies, and so on), together with an overview of the debate concerning the legitimacy of these quantitative methods within the social sciences. Taking account of the rapidly increasing use of Internet surveys, we consider some of the techniques available for conducting survey research online, paying attention to the advantages and limitations of this relatively new medium. Finally, there is a focus on the opinion polling method as an example of an application of the general sample survey method designed for uncovering peoples' political values and orientations. In particular, the chapter considers the role and effectiveness of political opinion polls at previous British electoral contests, in order to develop insights into the value of the sample survey method for researchers.

In Chapter 7 we shall look at the logic of qualitative research – to explore the meanings that people have of the world around them. This is a research approach that favours small-scale but detailed and intensive study of the lives of people as they are really lived. As a consequence, the researchers' objective in using this style of research is to construct an understanding of the social world from the point of view of those whom they are examining. This approach will be contrasted with the logic of quantitative research. The chapter will examine the use of different types of approach and method that are favoured by qualitative researchers to offer an overview of the defining characteristics of the qualitative approach – these include ethnography and participant observation as well as in-depth personal or group interviews. Special attention will also be given to the issues that researchers must consider when using a broadly qualitative research approach. Chiefly, these concern issues to do with validity, access, ethics and reflexivity. The chapter also offers a discussion of issues of identity, anonymity and communication in relation to conducting interviews and observation online.

Having conducted a research project and gathered the data, the researcher is left with the question: 'What do I do with this information to make sense of it, and how can I use it to address my research question?' We attempt to deal with this question in Chapter 8. The strategies and techniques that are used in the process of analysing data will be somewhat different, depending on whether one is dealing with information that is broadly quantitative or qualitative in nature. Nonetheless, two broad objectives must be met if the

researcher is fully to exploit the data irrespective of whether it is quantitative or qualitative in nature – that of *data preparation* (to format the data, and reduce its scope and size) and *data analysis* (to abstract from it and draw attention to what is important). In this chapter, we will consider what approaches, strategies and techniques are available to the researcher in order to make best use of the research data. We introduce a range of techniques for tackling various research problems, using different types of data. We will identify a range of quantitative techniques used for the description and explanation of variables, and their relationships with one another, before addressing techniques for analysing textual, visual and discursive data using a qualitative approach. This chapter aims to introduce readers to the *essentials* of a variety of data analysis methods, and to enable readers to become familiar with the core principles of those methods. It is intended that readers will have a sufficient understanding of the most commonly adopted analytical techniques which will provide the foundation for further reading, and a selection of guided readings is provided at the end of the chapter. We also recognise that, particularly in small-scale projects, researchers will often make use of a *variety* of different types of data (both qualitative and quantitative) in the course of conducting a single research project, and that this requires them to analyse such data in tandem. In this chapter, we therefore consider strategies for integrating different approaches and techniques for analysing different types of data in order to generate meaningful, credible and insightful results.

A research report should present the outcome of your endeavours, demonstrate the validity of your research and its conclusions, and show why the research was worth doing. It should also make interesting reading. Research reports can be distinguished from other types of report which aim only to relay findings to readers – research reports seek to link these findings to a theoretical model, or to one or more empirically testable hypotheses. Chapter 9 will examine the way in which research findings can be used to address the research question under investigation within the chosen theoretical framework. Given that the presentation of such data is not something that comes naturally to most people, this chapter will look at a variety of writing strategies that are aimed at managing the process of writing, and also facilitate the development of a writing style that is concise and confident. Chapter 9 will also emphasise the importance of writing for your audience, whether that be an academic tutor, a funding body or an employer. While there is no single model of report writing that academics and practitioners would agree to follow, there is a conventionally agreed set of sections that researchers should always include and this will be examined in turn, paying particular attention to the importance of report structure and style. This chapter will also include clear guidance on the correct citation of references and discuss the various reasons for doing so.

Having considered the variety of approaches to research, their strengths, weaknesses and limits, the final chapter is concerned with how to get support

for one's research plans – how to write a research proposal to gain a place on a PhD programme, get a research grant from an external research funding agency, or convince an employer to support a particular research project. Readers are introduced to the idea that a research proposal is not just a statement about the purposes of the research, how it is to be carried out, the resource implications of the proposed investigation, and a timescale for completion. It is also an *argument*. Through the proposal, the researcher is presenting a case, in which the intention is to convince others of the general merits and feasibility of the proposed study. In this chapter there is an overview of the criteria that are commonly used to assess the merits of research proposals. They need to provide a clear understanding for the reader of how to approach the development of the proposal, and how to persuade both specialist and non-specialist members of any review committee that the proposed activity is sound and worthy of support under their criteria on the selection of projects. Finally, there is a step-by-step guide on how to write a research proposal. This draws upon examples from a successful application that won a grant from an external research funding agency. Throughout, attention is paid to the similarities and differences of research proposals that are developed for broadly qualitative and quantitative research studies.