

# What is Research?

## CHAPTER CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Social research is persuasive	5
Social research is purposive	6
Social research is positional	10
Social research is political	14
Traditions of enquiry: false dichotomies	18
Ethics: pause for reflection	22

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By studying and doing the activities in this chapter you will:

- be able to define 'research'
- be able to respond to the view that social research is persuasive, purposive, positional and political
- be able to articulate the purposive nature of research in the social sciences
- have reflected on the capacity of research in influence change
- be able to express the reasons for doing your own research study
- be able to articulate the potential of your own research to 'make a difference'.

## Introduction

All social research sets out with specific *purposes* from a particular *position*, and aims to *persuade* readers of the significance of its claims. These claims are always broadly *political*.

This definition is our starting point in this book. You may not agree with it, but we hope that by the end of this chapter you will be able to express the extent to which you do, and criticise those aspects that you take issue with.

The chapter is organised around four statements which identify what we see as characteristic of social and educational research. The chapter 'unpacks' these statements, and invites you to make your own responses to them. As we said in the Preface, these responses will contribute directly to the development of your own research methodology.

We think it is important to begin this book by encouraging you to set out what *you* mean by research because it is this which underpins your research study and the decisions you will make within it (just as for us, our own definitions of research directly influence our research design and methodological positions). In this book we are addressing issues for those who are developing research studies for higher and research degrees; thus, this first section will focus on what we mean by research in the context of academic study of academic awards.

The purpose of much research at Masters or Doctoral level is not so much to *prove* things, but more to *investigate* questions, *enquire* into phenomena and *explore* issues. Many researchers either want to understand a situation more clearly or to change things by virtue of their research, and some want to do both. But all research, necessarily, is about asking questions, exploring problems and reflecting on what emerges in order to make meaning from the data and tell the research story. As such, social research is also a moral act within which the researcher holds responsibility for ensuring that resulting change is 'for the better'. In this sense, researchers work for the social 'good'.

Of course, there will always be disagreement about what is 'for the better' and what is 'socially good'. This is why we emphasise the role of *persuasion* in creating a telling account. However, an important function of this *persuasion* is that it makes explicit the ways in which the research specifically avoids doing harm. Across the social sciences, where most, if not all, enquiry treats of human lives and values, the ethical imperative is arguably a primary consideration in research design. Because of this, we have not included a chapter on 'ethics' as such. Rather, we have chosen to include persistent reminders throughout the book that all research activity, from the outset, requires responses to ethical issues.

## Social research is persuasive

Those who carry out social research aim to persuade readers of the significance of their claims.

How does research 'persuade'? To answer this question, we start here by looking at what counts as research for different people: that is, how research is defined in relation to its capacity to bring about change.

### Activity 1.1

Take some time to think about the following deceptively simple question; it is asked to help you articulate what you mean by 'research'.

#### **What is 'research'?**

Make a few notes in your research journal in response to this question.

Over the years, we have been asking our own students to think about their response to the question in Activity 1.1. They have responded in different ways. The following list gives some students' written responses to the same question:

- Research is the investigation of an idea, subject or topic for a purpose. It enables the researcher to extend knowledge or explore theory. It offers the opportunity to investigate an area of interest from a particular perspective.
- The methods you use to obtain information from a variety of sources.
- Investigation and discovery. An opportunity to investigate a theory that requires further interpretation and greater understanding.
- A rigorous enquiry about an area which is of interest for various reasons, e.g. it may be an area about which little is known, or an area which is causing concern.
- Discovery, finding out, study, looking in depth, investigation, reaching new ideas/ conclusions.
- The term research is for me a way of describing a systematic investigation of a phenomenon or area of activity. It can sometimes be accurately measured scientifically or data collected can be analysed and compared to identify trends, similarities or differences.

**Activity 1.2**

We have listed below the terms used in the above definitions of research. Glance through the list and then look back to the definition you wrote in your response to Activity 1.1. Are any of the terms listed here included in your own definition? Are any of them useful to you in revising your definition? Make some notes – in your research journal – on any changes you've made and what you've learned about your own thinking about research.

asking	measure
conclusions	new ideas
critique	opportunity
depth	perspective
discovery	purpose
enquiry	questioning
explore theory	rigorous
extend knowledge	scholarship
evaluate	subject
finding out	systematic
idea	topic
information	trends
interpretation	understanding
investigation	wisdom

**Social research is purposive**

What is often forgotten (as too obvious) is that any piece of research in the social sciences emerges from a distinct purpose (whether or not this is apparent to the reader).

As you have seen, our students' descriptions of research convey a strong sense of finding out, of *purposive* enquiry. The task of researchers to 'find out' is highlighted by Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) who emphasise the generation of knowledge, solving of problems and better understanding:

In a general sense, research means finding out ... the types, or methods [that] have in common the generation of knowledge at varying levels of detail, sophistication, and generalizability. Research results in the creation of knowledge to solve a problem, answer a question, and better describe or understand something. In all these instances, producing new knowledge highlights the research process aimed at finding out. (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996: 5)

This is not surprising, because, as the following discussion demonstrates, what is important to those who carry out research – whatever its scale – is that it should somehow *make a difference*.

In the following group tutorial various definitions of ‘research’ are offered and discussed. Focus, as you read, on the ideas which emerge about:

- the *meaning of the term* ‘research’
- what research should *accomplish*.

### Group tutorial: What do we mean by ‘research’?

In preparation for this tutorial the students were asked to write down their response to the question ‘What is research?’. They draw on their written notes in the discussion which follows.

- SN OK, well ... what I've written here is/it probably sounds, really/I don't know ... OK, 'Research is a process of purposeful, in-depth investigation of a particular issue. It follows a defined structured approach to obtain answers which make useful contributions to knowledge or to practice'.
- Tutor So, research is a process – has to be purposeful, and make a contribution to knowledge, OK. But this definition goes on to make us ask a number of questions, such as: What do you mean by 'in-depth'? Does research have to follow a 'defined structured approach'? Does it always have to find 'answers'?
- AM Well I've got a note here about ... well ... I understand the term to mean looking into an issue that is of interest, or needs analysis, in great detail. By doing this, the issue becomes clearer, is easier to explain and, if it's contentious, becomes more easily resolved. Researching an area helps to tease out the problems and make the picture clearer. This should help focus on the areas that need more work. I was thinking about my problem with focusing in on precise questions there, I think ...
- MT Mmm ... It's difficult isn't it? When you have to pin it down. I've got a note about, well, I said 'To take a particular issue that is specific and possibly innovative to study in depth' – that's what I think research is ... and I said that 'Results can be interpreted by the perspective of others – it stimulates debate and further issues for consideration'.
- Tutor So, research leads to the clarification of issues – and ideas? – and leads to the generation of yet more issues to be considered? Could we say that research often generates more questions than answers?
- CT Possibly, but it does provide a means of finding out about issues of concern or areas of interest. When I was thinking about this I said that it was 'Drawing together a variety of thoughts and opinions in order to move these issues or interests forward and therefore build upon the research findings'. I think research is about encouraging other professionals to challenge or just become interested enough to find out more – so yes – more questions but also some 'responses' to issues ... some answers.
- MM It is about generating understanding, greater awareness of an idea, achieving additional knowledge and meaning – isn't it?

- Tutor So, what's emerging here is the importance of research as an *organising structure*, a means by which a body of knowledge is assembled in response to questions and new knowledge generated.
- SN Yes, research is often an investigation which is used to gather information. In my notes I wrote ... 'To gain new knowledge and to confirm, or disprove information already known'.
- Tutor So one of the purposes of research is to check out existing assumptions? What about the role of research in bringing about change?
- MM Yes, for example a lot of research is usually an investigation into a topic which is then evaluated. And there are links between educational research and policy-making – those kinds of studies sometimes lead to change in a Local Authority, for example. My key thing about research was that ... 'Research informs events and allows for critical appraisal of the findings'. That's what I wrote.
- CT Research needs to affect thinking and/or practice.
- SN Research can also reveal the unexpected!

### Activity 1.3

Before you move on, take some time to think about the following question. It is designed to help you articulate *your* reasons for doing the particular research study *you* have chosen.

#### **What is the purpose of your research study?**

We asked 114 of our students attending a study school to write down their reasons for undertaking the study they had chosen. The 97 students who responded gave us answers which we sorted into the following six categories:

- to bring about change
- because it was commissioned by funders
- for interest
- to get a qualification
- for self-development
- for understanding.

Of the 97 students, 82 gave a single reason for undertaking their research and the remaining 15 gave two reasons. The reasons given by the students are ranked in order of importance in Table 1.1.

We do not take the outcomes of this small survey to mean that few of our students are interested in gaining their higher degree or that only 17 of the 97 were

**Table 1.1 Responses of students to the question ‘Why are you doing this piece of research?’**

Category	Number of responses (n=97)
Change	30
Self/personal development	29
Understanding	29
Interest	17
Commissioned	5
Qualification	5

interested in their work! We could say that getting the degree is a ‘taken-for-granted’ reason! What *is* interesting is that important factors for these students were the opportunity to bring about *change* – to make a difference; their own self-development as professionals and the chance to develop new or deeper understandings.

These are examples of their comments in the categories listed in Table 1.1:

#### *Researching to bring about change*

- To find out how I can make a difference to practice in order that children’s well-being, their learning and their group identity will be improved.
- To enhance my work with children ‘at risk’.

#### *Researching for self-development*

- To challenge some of my own ideas.
- To extend my own thinking.
- To improve the way I do my job.
- To increase my professional development and understanding.

#### *Researching for understanding*

- To develop a greater understanding of pupils’ learning in collaboration with their parents.
- To gather background information on how gender is affected by different social and economic backgrounds through a solid review of what’s been done already, and then to gather together new information obtained through questionnaires and informal interviews.
- To gain a more in-depth understanding of the people in my team whom I support. I want to understand more about their backgrounds, attitudes towards students, education and their relationships with other workers in the field.

So, students often carry out research with the expressed purpose of bringing about some kind of change – in the situation they are researching, in themselves and in their own understanding.

This is an important point of reflection, because if you are clear about your research rationale you will be better able to highlight your own particular motivational factors and articulate those in your written report. Clarity about research purpose is also essential in making decisions about methodology.

#### Activity 1.4

Look back at your own response to the question in Activity 1.3.

Are your reasons for carrying out your own study reflected in the categories we identified in Table 1.1? Do you have a different reason?

### Social research is positional

Since research is carried out by people, it is inevitable that the standpoint of the researcher is a fundamental platform on which enquiry is developed. All social science research is saturated (however disguised) with positionality.

Research *becomes* research when its written report is made public (Stenhouse, 1975), thus giving expression to the standpoint of its authors in a given context. It is the context in which research is designed, conducted and (eventually) reported which gives it its real meaning. Social research does not take place in isolation; people drive research, they identify the emerging issues to be studied and they create – in context – the methods by which situations are further understood, and they communicate its outcomes to chosen audiences. The positionality of the researcher affects research designs and processes as well as the ethical practices which are inevitably present throughout any study involving human beings. As Hannon has it, research takes place in the contexts of its community environment, in interaction with the rest of life. He suggests that we '[T]hink of educational research as a living plant in interaction with its environment – constantly renewing itself, sometimes growing, sometimes declining...' (Hannon, 1998: 150). This ecological perspective on research encourages the idea of research *itself* changing as wider social contexts and needs for understanding change. The ways in which we choose to conduct our enquiry, the nature of our questions and the moral intents are expressions of our positionality and will govern the ways in which we craft and change the research act itself.



Teaching in different geographical and political contexts has heightened our awareness of the importance of the particular theatre of enquiry in which research takes place, and how those situations inform and shape research questions, the methodological frames, ethical practices and the nature of the reports.

Koch (2001) studied the factors which influence young women students' choices of post-secondary education and was constructed in the context of its location in the Arabian Gulf. Within that context, the research needed to understand and take account of (and ultimately gain expression in) the balance of local and expatriate population and of the political, religious, cultural and economic realities of life in the Gulf States. Similarly, a report by Parackal (2001) examined the perspectives of teachers of children with special educational needs in Beirut, Lebanon. This study is particularly informed and shaped by its context, and must be interpreted in the context of the social structure of the country, with the civil war of 1974–89 seriously affecting educational developments in the country.

Thus the need to research particular issues grows from the contexts in which the researcher operates, and what is an appropriate research question in one context often lacks relevance in others. For example, Khan (2002) studied the development of strategies for managing the behaviour of young children in kindergartens in Trinidad and Tobago without recourse to corporal punishment. This study took place in the context of a developing country where the death penalty was still in operation and where the beating and physical chastisement of children at home and in schools was not out of the ordinary, but where issues of children's rights were beginning to form part of the educational/social agenda. Khan's rationale for her study was born out of a professional and political context and was 'of the moment' in that context. Her clear moral and political position provided both her motivation for carrying out the study and the organising structure of her final report.

Here is another example from political studies of the importance of understanding positionality. Michael Bérubé's (2010) book *The Left at War* is described by the publishers thus:

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Bush's belligerent response fractured the American left – partly by putting pressure on little-noticed fissures that had appeared a decade earlier.

In a masterful survey of the post-9/11 landscape, renowned scholar Michael Bérubé revisits and reinterprets the major intellectual debates and key players of the last two decades, covering the terrain of left debates in the United States over foreign policy from the Balkans to 9/11 to Iraq, and over domestic policy from the culture wars of the 1990s to the question of what (if anything) is the matter with Kansas. ...

*The Left at War* insists that, in contrast to American countercultural traditions, the geo-political history of cultural studies has much to teach us about internationalism – for 'in order to think globally, we need to think culturally, and in order to understand cultural conflict, we need to think globally.' At a time when America finds itself at a critical crossroads, *The Left at War* is an indispensable guide to the divisions that have created a left at war with itself. (<http://nyupress.org/books/book-details.aspx?bookId=1016> Description)

In a review of the book, Yakira (2010) asks 'Whose Left, Which War?' and notes, of Bérubé's book:

Like him, I don't have much respect for reductionist-paternalist explanations, typically endemic in a leftist kind of thinking about, for instance, the 'ordinary people's' support for Thatcher in England, Reagan or Bush in the US (which are the main topics of the last two chapters of *The Left at War*) and – one could add here perhaps – for the Likud, or Netanyahu in Israel. I could not avoid thinking, however, while I was reading the non-reductionist attempt to understand the 'ordinary people's' rejection of the Left, that Bérubé was doing himself after all a relatively easy job: not less important and sometimes more intellectually challenging than the 'ordinary people' is what the 'non-ordinary' adversary of the Left, the intellectual *on the right* for example, has to say. Bérubé typically ignores this kind of being.

Yakira (2010: 2) goes on to explain his feeling of 'outsideness' from the wars discussed by Bérubé, as a result of 'geographical and institutional distance', and also because the book seemed to him to 'lack the reflexive distance needed in order to be able to fully understand the stakes of the positions defended or attacked in this book'. What we have here is a clear positioning of the reviewer of Bérubé's work and a clear recognition of the ways in which work can be interpreted when viewed from different geopolitical positions and life experiences.

Positionality is an issue across the social sciences. As a final illustration we have turned to a study of the effects of winning the lottery on the lifestyle of winners (Hedenus, 2011). In a narrative study of 14 lottery winners, Hedenus presents the perspectives of the winners who seek to show that they are not 'squanderers of wealth' but 'responsible spenders'. However, there are clues to the position of the author when she writes, in the introduction to the paper, of how this study is different from previous work:

Concerned to show that the lottery winners in general are no squanderers, researchers and journalists have conveyed an image of the winners as passive and restrained. They appear almost intimidated by their wealth, safely storing it in a bank and for the most part keen to keep their ways unchanged. With a few exceptions (e.g. Abrahamson, 1980; Casey, 2003; Falk and Mäenpää, 1999; Larsson, forthcoming), previous research has not tackled the question of why this tendency has come to dominate among lottery winners.

In this article, narrative analysis of qualitative data from a study on lottery winners is employed to examine the interviewees' accounts of how they have lived their lives after the windfall. The aim is to investigate how the squandering-winner narrative may be used by winners in their self-presentations and post-winning narratives, and to consider how the different narratives relate to social norms concerning identity and consumption. In this respect, the lottery winners may be viewed as an instance of all those having to come to terms with sudden wealth. (Hedenus, 2011: 23)

There are times when the positionality of the research(er) may appear to be circumstantial, though we would argue that, as researchers, our positionality is always also informed and sculpted by our values and morals.

### Activity 1.5

We have given some examples of studies that have arisen out of the specific moral and physical contexts in which students have found themselves and others from the literature. Your research report will need to include some picture of these contexts as they relate to your own study. Try writing 200–300 words, which begin to map out these factors.

Consider:

- What is the political context?
- What is the social context in which it will take place?
- Are there religious and/or political factors which will influence your research questions or your research design?
- Are there personal values and morals which shape and drive your approach to research?
- How might these factors shape your research study?

The following example demonstrates the points highlighted in Activity 1.5.

For her MA dissertation, British Forces school teacher Ceri Tacey chose to research gender issues appertaining to 4 and 5 year-olds in a small British military community. In her introduction to the study report she writes:

### Introduction

This research study is set in a British military community overseas and reflects influences that are unique to this society. I set out to explore the question, 'Why do the boys like to build and the girls like to draw?' This question originated from a series of classroom observations in the foundation setting, where I had become concerned by the apparent gender divide in the children's choice of activities, and the impact this could be having on their overall development. Living in a military community, I was increasingly struck by the imbalance of power I observed. This led me to read feminist theories and consequently to the discovery of discourses circulating in our society relating to 'culturally specific categories through which we give meaning to our lives, practice our lives, invest emotionally in our lives and constitute our social structures' (MacNaughton, 1998 p.158). The feminist viewpoint I had taken in relation to the military community led me to believe that the children's stereotypical behaviour in the classroom was caused by home influences. This theory was later confounded, but it formed the basis of my decision to analyse the gender issues surrounding the children in my class. (Tacey, 2005)

Tacey has here painted for us the social and political contexts of the study along with her own theoretical stance, which also informs the political stance she is taking at the outset of this investigation. Tacey's own feminist position, declared at the outset, was in apparent juxtaposition to the power relations which were apparent due to the military hierarchy. This positioning of the researcher in the research context is made clear at the outset.

### Social research is political

Research which changes nothing – not even the researcher – is not research at all. And since all social research takes place in policy contexts of one form or another, research itself must therefore be seen as inevitably political.

There was a strong sense in the tutorial discussion (on pages 7 and 8) that it is what research *achieves* that gives it its definition. It was Lawrence Stenhouse who defined research as 'Systematic and sustained, enquiry, planned and self-critical, which make public criticism' (1975: 87) and, for us, this is as good a definition as any – having, by and large, stood the test of time. Though of course new views of research also see the process as 'messy', and thus less systematic, research is also becoming accepted – particularly that which adopts more boundary-pushing, qualitative methodological approaches. It is, however, the 'making public' which ultimately brings about change and so the central argument about the capacity of social science enquiry to influence change is present in Stenhouse's (1975) view of research.

But to say 'this research has changed this ...' or 'that study made a difference to ...' is the important defining feature. So, research worthy of the name must bring about some change: change in the researcher, change in the researched, change in the user of research.

#### Activity 1.6

Think of a research paper which you have read recently.

- What did the authors seek to change?
- What impact might it have?
- On whom?
- On what?

In the following example, Adelle has addressed the questions in Activity 1.6 in her journal response to a paper by Faulks (2006). She notes:

I dithered over this but it's a good paper. This is a newish journal but I'm finding material that makes me think about what I'm doing for my thesis.

Notes on:

Faulks, K. (2006) Rethinking citizenship education in England: some lessons from contemporary social and political theory *Education, citizenship and social justice* Vol 1, No. 2 July 2006

Discussion of the introduction of compulsory 'citizenship' lessons in England, and the controversy surrounding that policy. Argues for the need to review so that such an aspect of curriculum really is effective in 'democratic renewal'. Challenges the Crick report. Has really made me think! Exposes the policy as sociologically naïve and makes the case for broader and 'bolder' approach to citizenship education.

The main impact of this paper (as I see it) is on *me*. I have a much better grasp now of the underlying assumptions and of quite how political (little p and big P) issues of citizenship education really are. All the issues bound up in the sociology of 'emotion, psychoanalysis and feminism stretch citizenship beyond its traditional focus on formal rights and requires us to consider ... relationships ... intimate citizenship' (p. 130). Plummer's idea of 'intimate citizenship' – wow! (2003) I think it's true to say that I see it all quite differently – rights alongside relationships ... in society as well as in the school and classroom.

Plummer, K. (2003) *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Washington, DC: University of Washington Press.

Having ascertained that most of our students want their research to bring about some (however modest) kind of change, we asked them to tell us briefly what difference they thought their research could make. All 97 students responded that something would happen as a result of their research. Their responses fell into four broad categories of change:

- policy
- practice
- professional development
- stimulus for further research.

Students' expectations for the impact of their research studies are ranked, in order of expressed importance, in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2 Students' expectations of the impact of their research on policy, practice or professional development ranked in order of expressed importance**

Students' expectation that their research would make a difference in the area of...	Number of responses (n=97)
Practice (personal/professional)	51
Professional development	32
Policy (institutional/local/national)	11
Stimulus for further research	3

There is a sense here of a desire for *action*, of students wanting to put the outcomes of their research to some practical operation. They said:

*Of making a difference to policy*

- Studies on the impact of Ofsted inspection on practice are few, therefore, my research will contribute to knowledge on this area.
- Education Services can be very focused on 'educating the child'. I would like to highlight the issues around perspective, contribution and values of parents as a policy factor.
- May be useful in policy development and the procurement of resources.

*Of making a difference to practice*

- My research will reflect my own practice, and in the way I train others.
- I hope the research will inform future practice in work with people with learning difficulties.
- I hope it will increase continuity of activities between multidisciplinary agencies working with women in the community.
- I'm planning to use it to develop new guidelines for the induction of new staff into the Unit.

*Of making a difference to professional development*

- ... it will give me a better understanding of what I do.
- It should influence the attitudes and perceptions of colleagues.
- The greatest difference I can hope it will make will be in terms of personal differences to my understanding and attitudes.
- I hope it will influence/provoke thought in other professionals about issues of gender and exclusion.

Policy, practice and professional development are all politically oriented or motivated arenas and the students' desire to influence developments in these areas of work is, in itself, political.

We can see the attempts to bring about change, or the desire to provide evidence which may be used to argue for change in many studies across the social sciences, as the following two examples illustrate.

In their abstract of a paper reporting a study of the effects of bullying on the labour market, Brown and Taylor (2008) write:

We explore the effect of bullying at school on the educational attainment of a sample of individuals drawn from the British National Child Development Study (NCDS). Our empirical findings suggest that school bullying has an adverse effect on human capital accumulation both at and beyond school. Moreover, the impact of bullying on educational attainment at age 16 is found to be similar in magnitude to class size effects. Furthermore, in contrast to class size effects, the adverse influence of bullying on educational attainment remains during adulthood. In addition, being bullied at school influences wages received during adulthood as well as indirectly influencing wages via educational attainment. (Brown and Taylor, 2008: 388)

As economists, Brown and Taylor approach the difficulties of bullying in terms of the cost to the economy. In so doing they address the problem of bullying not from a victim–perpetrator viewpoint, but they provide evidence of the cost to society of not addressing and curbing bullying, showing that the effects of bullying can continue long after the bullying acts have ceased. They conclude:

In order to facilitate research in this area, the collection of more recent individual level data on this crucial aspect of children’s experiences at school is imperative. In addition, there is a shortage of statistics on bullying at an aggregate level which has hindered attempts to ascertain the nature of trends in bullying behaviour. In order to alleviate the adverse effects of bullying at school and to effectively deploy Government funding in this area, it is apparent that policy makers need to be better informed about children’s experiences of bullying at school. (Brown and Taylor, 2008: 400)

In the field of criminology, Wilson et al. (2010) put forward an approach to managing sex offenders in the community which ran counter to the view that those convicted of such crimes should never be permitted to live back in the community and should remain in custody to prevent the opportunity of reoffending, thus protecting potential victims. In the abstract of their paper they write:

Sex offenders cause particular concern upon release and are often received with apprehension or hostility by the community. This in turn may increase their feelings of loneliness and poor self-esteem, hindering re-integration and potentially increasing re-offending. Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSAs) were first developed in Canada in 1994 and introduced in the UK in 2000. A ‘Circle’ consists of a group of four to six volunteers with the offender as the ‘Core Member’. Appropriately trained volunteers support and hold to account the core member, who has to volunteer to be part of the scheme, by providing them with social

contact and practical support while at the same time maintaining links to statutory agencies alerting them of any risk issues. Following completion of initial pilots, the scheme is currently being rolled out across the UK. This systematic review will describe the Circles model and its history and summarise the empirical literature, particularly with regards to outcomes. (Wilson et al., 2010: 48)

In reporting on an alternative approach to the release of sex offenders, the authors describe the process (and effectiveness) of a managed system of support, involving volunteers and the offender. They put forward evidence from a systematic review which demonstrates effectiveness, and their position in wishing to bring about change is clear when they conclude:

CoSA represents a community-based response to a community problem which gives a practical alternative to the often unhelpful demonising approach to sexual abuse prevalent in much of the media. (2010: 56)

### Traditions of enquiry: false dichotomies

Looking back over your notes and writings made during your reading of this chapter, how do you now respond to our opening statement? We wrote:

All social research sets out with specific purposes from a particular position, and aims to persuade readers of the significance of its claims. These claims are always broadly political.

It has long been argued (for example, Carr, 1995) that distinct paradigms and scientific method are less appropriate for educational research, for this creates a demand for divisions between researchers and teachers. Naturalism (or normative) and interpretive approaches, he argues, should be repudiated and the development of research that is 'both educational and scientific' should be the goal. Could the same be said for other disciplines in the social sciences? For example, does the same apply to sociology? Do distinct paradigms demand divisions between sociologists and social workers, or between architects and builders? How helpful is it to consider the 'distinctive' nature of a discipline in relation to research paradigms? Of course, it all depends on the research question and we shall come to this later in the book.

Just as it may erroneously seem that research methods are simply and readily 'to hand', research is similarly often characterised uncritically in terms of polarisations: it is qualitative or quantitative, or else it is *positivist* or *interpretative*, and so on. The emergence of *critical theory* in educational research offers a third paradigm, linked with the political stance of emancipation of individuals and



groups within society. Critical theorists would thus argue that their work is *transformative* in that it seeks to change people and societies. But in terms of the research process – of what actually happens when people *make* research – these paradigms are ultimately no more than *post hoc* descriptions of gross characterisation. In addressing a task we do not immediately go to adopt this or that methodology as such; rather, we again confront specific problems which we come eventually to locate in continually related – rather than opposed – ways of construing the world.

Denscombe (1998: 3) states that ‘the social researcher is faced with a variety of options and alternatives and has to make strategic decisions about which to choose’. He suggests six key issues should be taken into account when making decisions about the viability of social science research: relevance, feasibility, coverage, accuracy, objectivity and ethics. A series of questions are posed (under each of these six headings) for researchers to ask at the planning stage of their project. We suggest a seventh factor should be included in this checklist, that of *interest and motivation*, because research projects become part of the life of researchers and it is important that any research ‘grabs’ the researcher sufficiently to sustain them throughout the study and all its triumphs and disasters!

Some writers continue to support the idea of distinct research paradigms. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) offer the following scheme of what they see as contrasting approaches to research: specifically, normative, interpretive, complexity theoretical, and critical paradigms. Such broad, *post hoc* frameworks can be useful in characterising the means and concerns of any given study, but it must be clear that in practice – in making research as part of a lived world – it is not possible to study ‘society and the social system’ without at least some interactive notion of and reference to ‘the individual’, or to ‘generalise from the specific’ without in some way ‘interpreting [that] specific’.

Hence the idea of choice *between* broad approaches characterised in this way is ultimately spurious, and as Merton and Kendall (1986: 549) pointed out, the real choice is that combination of both which makes use of the most valuable features of each. The problem becomes one of determining *at which points* they should ‘adopt the one and at which the other approach’.

We can dig deeper into this realm of separate research paradigm and uncover further argument about the relationship between research design and various research methods. The 2011 American Educational Research Association meeting took the theme *Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good* (AERA, 2011). Reflecting on the programme, the AERA President and Programme Chair said that:

No single theory, method, or policy can serve as the silver bullet to transform education and to ensure robust learning opportunities for all our nation’s students. Our slate of Presidential sessions, and our featured speakers and activities, reflect a range of

approaches, methods, theoretical orientations, and disciplinary foci all organised around a central goal: to leverage educational research and scholarship to advance the field, to contribute to the knowledge base, and to promote the public good. (AERA, 2011: 3)

The thousands of papers spanning all areas of education and the full breadth of the methodological continuum demonstrated many and varied positions and approaches to research in the multivariant field of education and socially responsible educational research.

With the wide range of texts on research methods currently available, there is a wealth of opinion on record. Let us consider one further position at this point. Writing about research design in social research, de Vaus (2001) argues:

Failing to distinguish between design and method leads to poor evaluation of designs. Equating cross-sectional designs with questionnaires, or case studies with participant observation, means that the designs are often evaluated against the strengths and weaknesses of the method rather than their ability to draw relatively unambiguous conclusions or to select between rival plausible hypotheses.

Similarly, designs are often equated with qualitative and quantitative research methods. Social surveys and experiments are frequently viewed as prime examples of quantitative research and are evaluated against the strengths and weaknesses of statistical, quantitative research methods and analysis. Case studies, on the other hand, are often seen as prime examples of qualitative research – which adopts an interpretive approach to data, studies ‘things’ within their context and considers the subjective meanings that people bring to their situation.

It is erroneous to equate a particular research design with either quantitative or qualitative methods. (de Vaus, 2001: 9–10)

### **Making method/ology**

Decisions about the location of a particular piece of research (or a researcher) within a research paradigm and the selection of methods for research studies can only be made in the light of specific situations and particular phenomena. To be sure, there already exist traditions and ‘blueprints’ of practice which suggest – more or (often) less critically – ways of proceeding and which frequently condition our view of how phenomena should be investigated. But these should never be seen as techniques which can be lifted wholesale from other accounts and imported uncritically into an enquiry motivated by specifically different situations and subjects.

Research is, by definition, a search for form quite as much and at the same time as it has any content to report. Methods should be seen as being constructed (for particular purposes) rather than selected (for any general usefulness).

Such a view amplifies the earlier claim that the task of a methodology is to explain the particularity of the methods made for a given study. A characteristic purpose of a methodology is to show not how such and such appeared to be the best method available for the given purposes of the study, but how and why *this way of doing it was unavoidable – was required by – the context and purpose of this particular enquiry*. Thus, we suggest that methodological considerations stem from the obvious; that different researchers can offer different interpretations of the same data. Methodology requires researchers to *justify* their *particular* research decisions, from the outset to the conclusion of their enquiry.

The final difference between a persuasive and a merely sufficient methodology is that the convincing one takes little for granted. It worries endlessly at its own terms and is not content to justify its decisions largely by reference to other research. To be sure, research must be contextualised in terms of what other enquirers have claimed as findings (and it is normally the job of a literature review to do most of this), but it should also be located – and justified – in terms of an argument about the very nature and structure of knowledge and knowing.

Many popular texts on research methods offer information on ‘contrasting’ approaches (for example, Cohen et al., 2011). Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln continue to denote the ‘either/or’ response:

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim that their work is done from within a value-free framework. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 10)

But in reality, many researchers in the social sciences do not select one research paradigm to investigate all their questions, choosing *either* a normative *or* an interpretive approach. In our own work, we have – during the course of our research careers – worked within both positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Would we want to describe ourselves as ‘either’ qualitative ‘or’ quantitative researchers? The important point here is that we adopt research stances *as they are appropriate to our work*. There are important questions to unpack in the extract above, and perhaps the issue of greatest concern is that of values. Are studies which employ quantitative approaches *necessarily* value-free? Is such a state possible, or desirable? And is it realistic to approach research design by making the choice between ‘either’ the ‘objectivity’ of a normative model ‘or’ the ‘subjectivity’ of the interpretive model? Research studies often move between these broad approaches selecting the most appropriate for each part of the study. The issue is

not so much a question of which paradigm to work within but how to dissolve that distinction in the interests of developing research design which serves the investigation of the questions posed through that research.

### **Ethics: pause for reflection**

In this chapter we have suggested that all research is persuasive, purposive, positional and political. In your research journal consider these questions:

- What ethical issues should be taken into account in researchers' intent to make their research persuasive?
- What ethical issues underpin the purpose of any research study?
- In what ways does the positionality of a researcher determine ethical responses to their research?
- If all research is, in one sense or another, political, how does this manifest itself in ethical responses to an enquiry?

You will have your own responses to the above questions. However, we suggest that it is crucial that researchers, in their desire to 'persuade', maintain a careful transparency around their work and diligently report all aspects of their studies, analysing data and reporting findings faithfully. Research studies are often ethically or morally driven; some studies arise because the researcher has a clear purpose. In our own work, for example, we are committed to (among other things) promoting social inclusion in education and to the importance of early childhood education in building citizenship. These commitments constitute an ethical underpinning that drives our research, that has at its heart a purpose to persuade readers of our research reports, and that these issues are important and worthy of further attention. In this sense, our 'positionalities' are interwoven with our purpose: we do what we do because we are committed to the purposes of our research – they matter to us. And as such, the ethics of the studies we undertake have to be carefully worked out so that we acknowledge our positionalities from the outset, and design our research to take account of the ethical issues which underpin what we do. From this position, our studies of, for example, citizenship, inclusion and early childhood have a political mission, to make a difference, and in this sense there is an ethical and moral underpinning that pervades our work and that runs through a desire to make a difference 'for the good'.

If you have worked through the activities in this chapter, making notes and composing paragraphs as we have suggested, you will have written around 2,000 words which can be later incorporated into your dissertation or thesis.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we have:

- Encouraged you to reflect on a range of definitions and to develop your own definition of research
- Provided an overview of research as a persuasive, purposive, positional and political activity
- Considered the purposive nature of research
- Considered the positional nature of research
- Discussed the function of research as a process of political change
- Discussed the relationship between research paradigms and the nature of social research as persuasive, purposive, positional and political
- Reflected on the ethical issues arising from the chapter contents

## FURTHER READING

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) 'The nature of enquiry: setting the scene', Chapter 1 in *Research Methods in Education* (7th edn). London: Routledge.

This chapter sets out a contextual basis for educational research in relation to some of the foundations of inquiry, including scientific and positivistic methodologies; naturalistic and interpretive methodologies; mixed methods; and post-positivism, post-structuralism and postmodernism.

Snape, D. and Spencer, L. (2003) 'The foundations of qualitative research', Chapter 1 in J. Ritchie and J. Lewis, *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage.

In the first section of this chapter the authors seek to define qualitative research, drawing on its history and identifying philosophical and methodological issues in the paradigm.