

ONE

What is Social Research

- To introduce readers to alternative definitions of social research and key terms
- To place social research within the context of a pursuit of knowledge
- To introduce readers to two traditionally opposed approaches to the pursuit of knowledge: positivism and interpretivism
- To introduce readers to the main features of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research
- To highlight the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative approaches
- To discuss the potential for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches

- **Introduction**
- **Problems of knowledge**
- **Combining methods**
- **Reflection**
- **Summary**
- **Chapter research task**
- **Recommended reading**

Introduction

Social research may be carried out for a variety of reasons. For students and university academics, social research is conducted in order to extend our knowledge about some aspect of social life that we are interested in – whether our field is in business studies, humanities or one of the social sciences. Typically, we are interested in either testing the appropriateness of existing theories which seek to account for the behaviour we are studying, or in developing new insights – constructing new theories – to help build up our understanding of the processes behind this behaviour. We may, for instance, ask why certain people become addicted to gambling, in order to contribute to our more general understanding about psychological compulsion. Or, as part of a study into the broader phenomenon of New Politics, we might examine why it is that anti-roads protestors take part in direct action to pursue their environmental

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

concerns, rather than in more conventional forms of political activity, such as writing to a member of parliament.

For research practitioners, social research is usually carried out in order to inform decisions about which policies or initiatives might be most usefully implemented to solve everyday issues and problems, or to evaluate the effectiveness of such policies in meeting the objectives of those who originally instigated them. An example of such applied research may include an investigation into the feasibility of introducing CCTV (closed-circuit television) cameras into a shoppers' car-parking area in which there has recently been a spate of car break-ins and thefts. What do the police think about the proposed measures as a means of tackling crime? How much confidence do users of the car park have in the initiative for improving general security and safety? How much demand is there for such an initiative from local shopkeepers and traders? And how will local residents, who may have concerns about the invasion of their privacy that the surveillance equipment represents, view the introduction of CCTV? And what about the effectiveness of the introduction of CCTV? Research can be conducted to evaluate the impact of the surveillance system on car crime, to measure changes in car park users' 'fear of crime', and to assess the impact on the financial well-being of the local shopkeepers.

For action researchers, social research studies are likely to be initiated in order to solve an ongoing problem within an organisational setting or a particular workplace. For example, what can account for persistently high levels of absenteeism within a particular organisation? To what extent is occupational stress associated with the issue (and, indeed, what might be the source(s) of this problem)? And what measures might be introduced to alleviate the problem? Or the research may be based at a particular school in which there have been high rates of indiscipline and exclusions – what steps might the school leadership take to overcome these problems?

All of these styles of research have something that binds them together – they are all based upon the pursuit of information-gathering to answer questions about some aspect of social life.

Defining social research

But what does social research actually entail? This is not an easy question to answer. At one level, it is social, and as such the focus of the research is upon human behaviour. Whether we are investigating juvenile crime, why men choose to father children, the political loyalties of first-time voters, an organisation's decision to pursue a particular marketing strategy, or the experiences of the 'old-elderly' in residential care, we are examining human behaviour and the relationships with other human beings, groups, (sub)cultures and organisations.

As such, social research can be contrasted with the natural sciences – physics, chemistry and biology. The distinction is not always obvious, however,

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

and it is possible to find areas of research that straddle both the social world and the natural sciences. For instance, much *experimental psychology* that is concerned with animal behaviour is also *biological* in nature. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that when it comes to the focus of research, the activities of social researchers differ from those working within the natural sciences.

However, the difference between the social sciences and the natural sciences is not so clear when it comes to the question of how we actually conduct our research. This is the subject of considerable debate, and some of this centres on the question of methodology (see Definition 1.1). On the one hand, there are social researchers who would argue that when undertaking research projects, we should borrow approaches, designs and methods that are commonly used within the natural sciences – such as experiments and measurement. Others would argue that the social world is different from the natural world, and if it is to be investigated effectively social research needs to design its own approaches, designs and methods, which are more relevant and fit for purpose. This is a debate that we shall return to presently in this chapter.

Definition 1.1 Method and methodology

It is important to note the distinction between method and methodology. *Method* refers to the range of techniques that are available to us to collect evidence about the social world. *Methodology*, however, concerns the research strategy as a whole, including, as Seale (1998, p.3) notes, 'the political, theoretical and philosophical implications of making choices of method when doing research'. To this we might add the need to consider the ethical implications and consequences of our research, negotiating access to the field, and the role of values – both those of the author and those who have the power to impose some control over the research agenda, such as sponsors of research.

While it is difficult to define precisely what social research actually is, there are certain aspects of the notion 'research' upon which we can largely agree. The first of these is that research is not an arbitrary activity, but follows certain rules and procedures. There are many types of research method available; some of those in common usage include, for instance, social surveys, experiments, observations and in-depth interviews. Furthermore, we are interested in generating information of sorts, either to develop further insights into an area – to explain or explore a particular phenomenon – or to solve a problem, perhaps at work or in our local community. Research therefore consists of a means – method – and an end – knowledge.

One important aspect of research that is not so readily agreed upon, however, is:

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

- what counts as *valid* knowledge; and
- how should we acquire that knowledge?

Problems of knowledge

There are two broadly divergent views about the nature of knowledge, or what we call competing paradigms (see Definition 1.2), which we can group as:

- a positivist paradigm (most often associated with quantitative research strategies); and
- an interpretive paradigm (usually associated with qualitative research strategies).

The distinction between positivism and interpretivism as two polar opposites is somewhat artificial, and you will come across a great many other ‘-isms’ which fall somewhere within the spectrum which spans the two: empiricism, realism, relativism, social constructionism, idealism, postmodernism – the list is extensive. The positivist and interpretivist paradigms can, however, be said to have been enormously influential in the development of quantitative and qualitative approaches to social research.

Definition 1.2 Paradigm

According to Bryman (1988, p.4), a paradigm is ‘a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted, and so on’. Essentially, then, a paradigm is a set of assumptions about how the issue of concern to the researcher should be studied.

There are different styles of research (which are linked to different philosophical or world views that we hold) as well as different actual methods and techniques for collecting information (or data). For some of us, the method(s) and technique(s) we choose will largely be determined by our understanding of what constitutes acceptable knowledge, or what is termed our epistemological position (Definition 1.3). As Bryman (1989, p.248) states, the study of society:

exhibits contrasting paradigms about the nature of social reality and about what is acceptable knowledge concerning that reality. In this way, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is not simply a matter of different approaches to the research process, each with its own cluster of research methods ... but it concerns antagonistic views about more fundamental issues to do with the nature of one’s subject matter.

Definition 1.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is a crucial philosophical concept for social scientists, which considers questions to do with the theory of knowledge. Essentially, the two positions of positivism and interpretivism that are outlined here and in the following pages hold contrasting epistemologies. They differ in terms of their views about the status of different claims to knowledge and about how to judge knowledge claims.

The positivist approach

Very broadly speaking, there is one particular view of how research should be conducted that suggests that we should carry out research in the social sciences in ways that are similar to the methods within the natural sciences (physics, chemistry and biology). This is often called the positivist or 'scientific' approach. A consideration of the historical roots of positivism takes us back to the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century. Up to this point, faith in God had provided the generally accepted reasoning behind our existence and the way the world was. The world in which we lived was a matter of divine creation, and many explanations rested on a notion that things occurred because of God's will. Industrial development led to a shift in the relative position between humans and the natural world: industrialisation gave us the means to exert control over the natural world. This gave rise to the emergence of science, which challenged previous, theologically based explanations of the social order. Rather, science sought to explain the world by developing general laws. The natural world came to be understood by studying what could be observed as facts. As such, metaphysical notions of explanation were disregarded. This idea, as applied to the social world, can be traced back to the work of nineteenth-century philosopher August Comte (1798–1857), in his work *The Positive Philosophy* (Comte 1974). While the development of positivism has travelled a long and winding path, much of its essence can still be found in Comte's original writings.

Comte was very much concerned with progress in terms of finding the 'truth' about the social world. He regarded the scientific world as having achieved this goal in its application of natural laws based on observable facts. Such an approach to knowledge had superseded previous theological and metaphysical attempts at explanation: science was not concerned with divine or abstract explanations, but concrete facts based on empirical observations. These ideas were developed in the early part of the twentieth century, in particular through the work of a group of philosophers known as the Vienna Circle, in what was to become known as *logical positivism*.

Logical positivism took a stance which entirely rejected the metaphysical. Indeed, metaphysics should be:

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

written off as nonsense. The term 'nonsense' was used here not merely to express strong disagreement or disapproval, but as an exact description of metaphysical statements, something that followed from a 'logical analysis of language'. It was thought that all genuine questions must be capable of scientific treatment, and all genuine knowledge part of a single system of science. (Hanfling 1981, p.2)

This suggestion that questions should be open to investigation through scientific treatment necessitated the development of demarcation criteria. These criteria enabled science and non-science (i.e. metaphysics) to be distinguished, thereby laying down rules as to what could and what could not contribute to valid knowledge. Phenomena that could be directly observed, and articulated, would lead to the advancement of social knowledge; abstract phenomena, such as inner-meanings, had no place in a scientific treatment of the social world. Logical positivism also took on an inductive approach – that is, phenomena are first observed, and from these observations, theories are developed. Logical positivism, then, continues by a process of verification: more observations are made of similar phenomena in order to develop the theory further so it eventually becomes a law which can be applied to all similar social phenomena.

This approach found its critics, most notably Karl Popper (1902–94). For Popper (1959, 1972), the inductive, verificationist approach of logical positivism was fundamentally flawed, since in seeking to continually verify established theories, he felt that knowledge would not progress. He also saw the possibility that there would always be another situation, yet to be witnessed, that does not work according to the corresponding law, and so laws based on induction are based on assumptions. For example, if we wanted to develop a theory about why some workers perform better in their jobs than others, we may make a number of observations in the workplace that suggest that job satisfaction is linked to performance. Repeated observations in ten different workplaces would then concentrate on whether people who are satisfied in their jobs are outperforming those who are not. The question is, at what point do we stop trying to verify our theory? After ten observations, or 20 or 50? Whenever we stop, there will always be the possibility that we could have continued and found an example of people who were not satisfied outperforming those who were. Also, in pursuing this line of investigation, we are not exploring other possibilities, such as pay or desire to get promoted, and so forth. In Popper's view, a solution to both of these problems lies not in attempting to verify what we already know, but in trying to falsify it. By adopting this approach, theories are put to the test against newly collected data. If the data refute the theory, then we have reason to doubt the theory's usefulness in general application. In doing this, we continually challenge established theory, and inevitably make progress in our pursuit of knowledge. This idea lays the groundwork for many of the characteristics of Popper's approach, and what is often regarded as the foundation for the contemporary positivist paradigm.

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

The first characteristic of positivism, which has been a central element of the paradigm throughout its many manifestations, is that social phenomena can be explained by observing cause and effect. This is something which has been borrowed directly from the natural sciences, for example in the famous story of Newton's discovery of gravity: the cause of gravity leads to the effect of an apple, when unsupported, falling to the ground. In positivist social research, we seek to identify similar causal relationships, for example what causes some workers to perform better in their jobs than others.

Typically, this approach aims to test an existing theory by establishing a hypothesis (employee satisfaction at work and performance are positively related), and then collecting data to assess how appropriate the initial theory (as expressed in the hypothesis) actually is. Popper called this research approach the hypothetico-deductive method. It is a *theory-then-research* approach, meaning that our research question and strategy is guided by an a priori theoretical proposition. Data are collected so that the initial theory can be tested. This suggests that at the outset of the project, the researcher knows what the issues are that need to be examined, and what questions or hypotheses need to be addressed through the research. This theory-then-research approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Shifting from an inductive to the hypothetico-deductive method also leads to two other characteristics of the positivist approach, as presented by Popper. First, it is concerned with applying the general (theory) to the specific (case). Secondly, the demarcation criteria become refined so that valid inquiry is no longer governed simply by what can be observed, but by what is testable. So, in looking at employee performance at work, we should focus on issues such as pay, skill levels, training opportunities, degree of democracy in the workplace, whether trades are unionised, local unemployment rates, and so on. All these phenomena are tangible and can be 'scientifically' measured. They can also be framed in terms of hypotheses: for example, those with more training opportunities will perform better in their jobs. Attempting to look beyond these measurable phenomena, at things like people's motivations, their belief systems, their consciousness, and so on, amounts to no more than meaningless speculation because these are things that cannot be easily (let alone precisely!) measured, or therefore tested.

In this search for precision, this approach favours quantitative measuring instruments, including experiments, questionnaire surveys and content analysis. The research will be highly structured, typically large-scale and statistically based.

The logic of a positivist research design, then, is that:

- we seek to identify processes of cause and effect to explain phenomena, and to test theory;
- knowledge should be based on what can be tested by observation of tangible evidence; and
- researchers should use the scientific method, which emphasises control, standardisation and objectivity.

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

The implications are that:

- the research design should be highly structured;
- methods should be reliable; and
- the research design will aim to generate large-scale, statistically based studies.

Interpretivism

Throughout this book we shall come across many examples of instances where social researchers disagree on important aspects of methodology and methods. Many of these can be traced back to a difference of opinion on epistemology. For some, positivism offers a useful approach to the pursuit of knowledge in that it is considered to be scientific, a characteristic which is often associated with rigour, precision and reliability. Positivists' empirical and objective techniques of inquiry enable them to support their claims to knowledge as reliable facts. To others, however, the complexities of the social world demand an altogether different approach, which acknowledges those qualities peculiar to the human consciousness:

Because sociologists are human too, we can put ourselves in the place of others, appreciate the structural circumstances in which they find themselves, take account of their goals, and thereby *understand* their actions. This is what distinguishes a social science from a natural science. Daffodils don't *choose* to open their leaves and apples don't *decide* to fall from trees. Natural scientists therefore don't have to be like daffodils or apples to explain their behaviour. (Jones 1993, pp.67–8, original emphases)

This notion of understanding is often referred to as *Verstehen* (literally 'to understand'). It is based on a tradition that has its roots in the writings of figures such as Max Weber (1864–1930), who argued that in order to increase our knowledge of the social world, we must seek to understand it from the points of view of the people we are studying, rather than explaining human action by means of cause and effect (Weber 1949). From this perspective, understanding human behaviour and the intentions behind it demands a degree of empathy with our subjects, whereas explaining their behaviour as the result of some external cause does not (von Wright 1993).

Interpretivist researchers are keen to reinforce this distinction between the natural and social sciences, suggesting that unlike, say, the molecular structure of ice, which changes when heat is applied to it, we human beings do not passively respond to what is going on around us. Instead, we have the capacity to think through different courses of action, and respond (or not, as the case may be) on the basis of our interpretations and ideas. So, human action can only be understood by relating it to the conscious intentions, motives and purposes, and ultimately the values of the agent who performs it.

This interpretive paradigm is associated with unstructured qualitative methods, including *participant observation* studies and *in-depth interviews*.

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

The a priori approach of positivism suits quantitative methods since their use of predetermined measures can easily reflect the specific hypotheses of the researcher. The desire to understand human action from the perspective of our participants in an interpretivist approach, however, makes such predetermined measures unsuitable. Emphasis is placed on allowing the participants to provide an account of their world in their own words. Language is considered a tool with which we make meanings, and so in order to empathise with participants, it is important to allow their meanings to be expressed in the way they normally would be through their language.

Through piecing together an understanding, we eventually build (not test) theory. This analytic-inductive method is therefore a *research-then-theory* approach, in which we start with a relatively broad research question (rather than a prespecified hypothesis), and in the course of collecting our data, gradually develop our understanding of the issue. The research-then-theory approach and analytic induction are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Unlike positivism, the interpretivist approach assumes that human behaviour is not determined by external factors and processes that researchers can measure, but instead is shaped by the meanings people have of the world. So employees, for instance, will not automatically improve their performance at work when offered a pay rise, and they will certainly not all respond in a uniform way. Instead, they will carefully consider the pay rise, and a whole host of other issues and what these mean to them, before deciding how to respond. Such specific and unique issues might include their personal and collective relations with the employers, the history of industrial relations in their workplace, whether in their experience the manager is trying to bribe them, and so on.

These meanings and interpretations are difficult to measure in a precise and scientific way, and they will certainly differ from one firm to another. So the researcher must use more qualitative methods and personal involvement to gain an understanding of how people interpret the world around them, and how this informs their action. The research will therefore tend to be small-scale and intensive. It will also usually be flexible and relatively unstructured, and based upon detailed descriptions (rather than statistics) of what is seen and heard.

The logic of such an interpretive research design is not to explain why something happens, but to explore or build up an understanding of something of which we have little or no knowledge. Through piecing together such an understanding, we eventually build up a theory.

The implications are therefore that:

- the research design should be flexible and unstructured;
- methods should be valid; and
- the research design will generate small-scale and intensive data, using insider accounts and based on descriptions of what is seen and what is heard.

The key contrasting features of the two epistemological positions described so far are set out in Table 1.1.

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

Table 1.1 The positivist/interpretivist divide

<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Interpretivism</i>
1. Knowledge is based on phenomena that are directly observable (phenomenalism)	1. Knowledge is based on understanding interpretations and meanings that are not directly observable
2. The social world should be researched using the principles of natural science (such as experiments). Such a shared approach is often referred to as the unity of scientific method	2. The social world should be studied in its natural state (using participant observation and in-depth interviews) to understand naturally occurring behaviour
3. There is a stress on reliability and generalisability	3. There is a stress on validity
4. Explanation is achieved through the formulation of causal laws or law-like generalisations (nomothetic approach)	4. Explanation is achieved through descriptions of social meanings/reasons and other dispositions to action (idiographic approach)
5. There is use of the hypothetico-deductive method, in which there is an emphasis on testing given theory	5. There is use of the analytic-inductive method, in which theory is generated from the data
6. Methods imply researcher/respondent detachment in the objective collection of data	6. Methods imply insider approach – participation in life and culture of respondent/closeness of respondent and researcher in the joint construction of subjective data
7. Analysis is based on the statistical testing of given theories	7. Analysis is based on the verbal description and observation of actions and situations from which theory evolves

Critical social research

A third critical-emancipatory position can be identified within the social sciences which suggests that to know the social world, researchers need to take account of the historical, social and political contexts which constrain human thought and human action. Such researchers are concerned with understanding how underlying social structures have historically served to oppress particularly the working class, women and ethnic minority groups.

Ultimately, such an approach has emancipatory goals and claims empowerment for specific oppressed groups. The purposes of the research therefore are:

- to expose inequalities, malpractices, injustices, and exploitation;
- to give a voice to these excluded and marginalised groups; and
- to help explain generalised oppression in order to precipitate social change.

As Fay (1993, p.34) explains: 'To have the practical force it requires, critical theory must become an enabling, motivating resource for its audience – it must, in short, empower them. This empowerment has emancipation as its goal.'

As we shall see, critical social researchers are likely to adopt a flexible approach in their use of research methods, although they are likely to use these methods in particular ways that they consider to be appropriate for

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

realising the emancipatory aims of their research. Indeed, some researchers have argued for a specifically feminist methodology, which approaches the research process in a way that is very different from conventional styles of social research.

There is a debate between those who advocate a model of social science research whereby the aim is to generate *knowledge*, and those who conduct politically committed research in order to pursue a political agenda. For instance, Hammersley (1995, p.x) has stated that: 'I believe their [critical social researchers'] proposals that research should serve political goals directly represents an abandonment of the obligations of the researcher.'

In response, Humphries (1997, 2.6) claims that 'all research is inevitably political, since it represents the interests of particular (usually powerful, usually white male) groups'.

According to such a view, no research can ever be entirely objective or value-free. Such researchers seek to promote agendas that are at best 'masked' by conventional research and are often suppressed in various ways. This epistemological position will not be developed further in this chapter, but will be referred to throughout the book as a whole, and in particular in Chapter 2.

The relationship between epistemology, methodology and methods

We have already seen that there exist different epistemological perspectives, and that these reflect a number of assumptions about the social world. These assumptions are often referred to as ontology, so, for example, a positivist researcher might view the social world as an objective reality which exists regardless of how we interpret it. This ontological perspective informs an epistemological perspective that suggests that in order to know something of this world, we merely have to observe it from an objective point of view. An interpretivist might view the world as a subjective reality which is an accumulation of our experiences and the meanings we associate with them. In order to know something of *this* world, we must adopt an epistemological perspective which allows us to understand these subjective meanings.

So ontology is a set of assumptions about what the world *is*, and epistemology is a way of knowing about that world which reflects these assumptions. The way in which our ontological perspective feeds into our epistemological perspective is further reflected in our methodological approach. As noted in Definition 1.1, methodology concerns a wide-ranging number of considerations based upon our philosophical perspective as well as practical issues. Based upon this argument, it follows that epistemology should inform methodology, which in turn would inform methods. This relationship sees our ontological perspective at the foundation of our approach to research, with our methods being arrived at after a process of consideration of our epistemological position and our chosen methodology. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

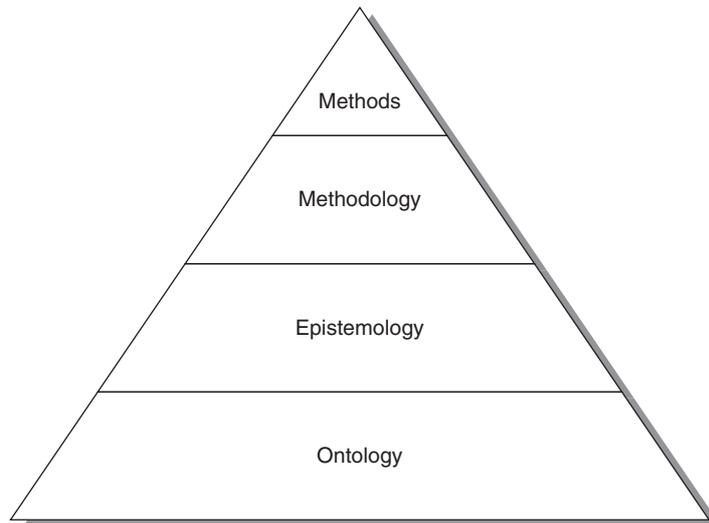


Figure 1.1 The relationship between theory and method

This suggests that our choice of methods will ultimately be determined by our philosophical perspective, therefore meaning that compromise on methods reflects a shift in our philosophical outlook on the world. As we shall see in the next section, though, this view can be challenged, and the rewards for doing so can be highly advantageous.

Combining methods

So, we have seen that for some, the type of method to be used for research is largely determined by one's commitment to a particular epistemological position. This, then, 'assumes a correspondence between epistemological position and research method' (Bryman 1988, p.118). Most commonly, this will involve adherence either to a positivist-quantitative style or to an interpretivist-qualitative style of research, or, as we have seen, a critical social research approach.

This approach to the use of methods in research is not without its critics, however. Increasingly, social researchers are inclined to adopt more flexible approaches to research methods in their studies. As Bryman (1989, p.255) states:

Each design and method should be taken on its merits as a means of facilitating (or obscuring) the understanding of particular research problems, and that a fetishistic espousal of favoured designs or methods and an excessive preoccupation with their epistemological underpinnings can only stand in the way of developing such an understanding.

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

For such researchers, the type of research method (or combination of methods) you choose will be largely determined by pragmatic considerations, including what is your research problem, and what constraints do you face in the research? For instance, you might consider that using questionnaires to discuss issues concerning bullying at work is too formal an approach for collecting data about such a sensitive issue. Perhaps a more empathetic approach, using personal contact (such as an in-depth interview), may more effectively gain the confidence of the respondents and encourage them to discuss the issue frankly – in formal research terms, enabling you to gain ‘social access’.

In this final section, we shall discuss in more detail the idea that the choice of method – or indeed combination of methods – that one makes in a research project should largely be governed by a desire to achieve the best possible data to address the aims and objectives of the research.

Multi-strategy research

Combining methods, or *employing triangulation*, in a single research project is a strategy that is not without its problems. However, it is increasingly advocated on the grounds that it helps to facilitate a more valid and holistic picture of society than that which could be acquired by remaining true to only one set of methods (Definition 1.4).

Definition 1.4 Multi-strategy research

Many social researchers use ‘multiple strategies of field research in order to overcome the problems that stem from studies relying upon a single theory, single method, single set of data and single investigator’ (Burgess 1984, p.144). This approach is frequently referred to as triangulation. It suggests that research conclusions that are derived from converging evidence – using a variety of different research methods – are likely to be more credible than research findings which are based on only one source of evidence. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998b, p.4) claim: ‘The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation.’

Classifying an approach as quantitative or qualitative does not mean that once an approach has been selected, the researcher may not move from the methods normally associated with that style. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and each is particularly suitable for a particular context. The approach adopted and the methods of data collection selected will depend on the nature of the inquiry and type of information required.

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

All the time, however, we have at the forefront of our minds that for some topics, our methods are context-specific. That is, that some methods really will not work by themselves in some situations. For instance, using a questionnaire survey to investigate why some young people feel alienated from the political system may not work all that effectively by itself – questionnaires may tell you the numbers of young people who are disengaged, but not necessarily why they *feel* this way. Alternatively, unstructured interviews are unlikely to give you precise measurements of the relationship between educational attainment and political alienation, neither will they necessarily be generalisable, or reliable, and they may even be accused of producing subjective (or anecdotal) accounts.

Why combine methods?

One obvious advantage of employing a combined methods or multi-strategy approach in your research is that it helps to compensate for the fact that there is no consensus in research. According to Denzin (2009, p.298):

Each research method implies a different line of action toward reality – and hence each will reveal different aspects of it, as much as a kaleidoscope, depending on the angle at which it is held, will reveal different colors and configurations of objects to the viewer. Methods are like the kaleidoscope: depending on how they are approached, held, and acted toward, different observations will be revealed.

As Brewer and Hunter (1989, p.17) note, mixing methods is all about trying to attain validity in research:

Triangulated measurement tries to pinpoint the values of a phenomenon more accurately by sighting in on it from different methodological viewpoints ... when two reliable instruments yield conflicting results, then the validity of each is cast into doubt. When the findings of different methods agree, we are more confident.

The logic of multi-strategy research is to try to overcome any deficiencies that may derive from a dependence upon any one particular (single) method, 'to attack a research problem with an arsenal of methods that have non-overlapping weaknesses in addition to their complementary strengths' (Brewer and Hunter 1989, p.17). Methods are combined not only to gain their individual strengths, but also to compensate for the particular faults and limitations of any single method.

Another reason for combining approaches using triangulation is to overcome bias in research. A key point to note about the limitations of being locked into only one research perspective and strategy is that all researchers bring to the study their own unique interpretations of how the research should be structured and interpreted, and to an extent, these interpretations are unique. This unique perspective is likely to influence the people observed, the questions asked, and ultimately the results themselves:

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Triangulation, or the use of multiple methods, is a plan of action that will raise sociologists above the personal biases that stem from single methodologies. (Denzin 2009, p.300)

The third key advantage for adopting a multi-strategy approach in your research is that it is likely to assist you in gaining a complete overview of the matter under investigation. According to Burgess (1982, p.163), triangulation, like the kaleidoscope, can help to provide a holistic view of the area under study: 'Different methods can be used, and different data collected, in order to address a variety of theoretical and substantive problems.'

In a study by Henn et al. (1997) on the reaction of grassroots members of the British Labour Party to organisational and policy changes initiated by the party leadership, the researchers combined quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative focus group data. From the questionnaire results, the researchers found that party members seemed to give overwhelming support to the party leader, Tony Blair. Over three-quarters (78%) stated that he had had a positive impact on the party's fortunes, a further 88% claimed that he was a potential 'election winner', and 76% referred to him as a 'strong leader'. However, the data from the focus groups helped to clarify and contextualise the responses of the party members to Tony Blair's 'New Labour' project by confirming their overall suspicion of the modernisation process initiated by the party leadership. A typical reaction expressed by one party activist that met with support among most others participating in the various focus groups was that: 'I don't necessarily agree with everything Tony Blair says or does, but if it means defeating the Tories then I'm all for it' (Henn et al. 1997, p.506).

The multi-strategy research approach therefore enables (and encourages) the researcher to investigate a particular research area from a variety of different angles and perspectives, focusing on different questions and issues, collecting different types of data, analysing these data using different techniques, and interpreting the results from a variety of different positions. In this way, it is argued, no stone will be left unturned – all possible dimensions of the research field will be examined, and all possible meaning extracted from the data. As a consequence, by the end of the project, a thorough and comprehensive research study will have been completed.

So, should alternative research perspectives be seen as inherently dichotomous? Laurie and Sullivan (1990) examine some of the questions raised by the debate on using different methods in the same study. They conclude that: 'the tendency to see qualitative and quantitative methodologies as mutually exclusive and antagonistic paradigms is a misleading representation of the reality of social research practice' (Laurie and Sullivan 1990, p.113).

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

Reflection

Think about what would be involved in adopting a triangulated or multi-strategy research approach in a research project on a topic that is of interest to you, and as you do so, ask yourself:

- What is the underlying logic and rationale for combining methods in such a research project?
- What is entailed in adopting such a strategy?
- What are the epistemological questions that arise?
- What are the methodological questions that arise?

How do advocates of triangulated research strategies support their claims that such an approach tends to:

- increase the validity of a research study?
- overcome problems of bias in a research study?
- improve the 'wholeness' of a research study?

What are the arguments against using a multi-strategy research in your intended project?

Summary

This chapter has introduced you to what social research is, how it compares with research that is carried out in the natural sciences, and to the different styles of research that are available to the researcher. We have seen that there are, broadly speaking, two dominant and apparently irreconcilable approaches to what counts as knowledge within the social sciences, and how best to acquire it. These are positivist and interpretive epistemologies.

Different epistemological positions have in the past tended to steer the types of method and technique employed in research, and created a dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research approaches in the social sciences. Thus, positivism is usually associated with techniques such as experiments and surveys, which emphasise controlled conditions in which the research programme is standardised and heavily structured, and where there is respondent/subject detachment. These are usually called quantitative methods. The interpretive approach tends to emphasise naturally occurring phenomena, and adopts unstructured research approaches in which there is an interaction between the respondent and the researcher so that meaning can be fully explored and articulated. These qualitative methods and approaches include (among many others) participant observation, in-depth interviewing, focus-group interviewing, projective interviewing and personal documentary analysis.

(Continued)

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

(Continued)

At an epistemological level, the quantitative–qualitative methods divide appears insurmountable, given that the approaches are based on contrasting ideas about what society is, how knowledge about it is to be properly gained, and on the aims of research (whether one is predicting, explaining or understanding). However, at a technical level, the debate is more concerned with which research tools are best suited to the discovery of particular aspects of society. That is, which research approach and research methods will most usefully enable the researcher(s) to address their research question? Here, then, some social researchers note the possibilities of combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single research study.

In the next chapter we shall consider in more detail the critical social research position reviewed earlier. However, we shall also return to the positivist and interpretivist perspectives throughout the different chapters of this book, particularly (but not only) in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter research task

Carry out a critical review of an empirically-based research study of your choice. A journal article should suffice for this task, providing it has a section on the methodology and methods employed. This could be something which is already familiar to you, which you wish to revisit, or something entirely new. A critical review involves integrating the approach, findings and conclusions of a study. Ask some or all of the following questions in order to structure your review:

1. What are the aims and objectives of the research? (Are there any hypotheses? How well are these set out? Are they grounded in theory? Do the results have practical implications? Was the research worth doing and well conceived?) You are likely to find these most easily by scanning the article's introduction and conclusion.
2. Is the study located within a particular theoretical context? (Hint: it probably is!) Is the study informed by particular assumptions about the world? If so, this may impact upon the focus of the research, the data gathered and the structuring of the conclusions that are drawn.
3. Provide a detailed critique of the methodology employed. As well as commenting upon the general research strategy, this may include an examination of the epistemological framework the author(s) is/are using.
4. Are there any ethical issues that you would like to comment upon?
5. How about the findings of the study. Are the data accurately reported? How are the data presented? (Accurately? Lucidly? Is it too technical?)
6. Conclusions. What claims does the author make? Do the analyses bear out these claims? Are competing hypotheses addressed and satisfactorily eliminated? Have

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH

- other plausible hypotheses been ignored? If so, does (and how) this invalidate the conclusions?
7. Is it possible to draw conclusions which the author missed or overlooked? Is what has been said probably true/false/undecidable?

As you can see, a critical review is not a descriptive summary of the text, but a detailed analytical examination.

Recommended Reading

- Brewer, J. and Hunter, A. 1989. *Multimethod Research: A Synthesis of Styles*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bryman, A. 1988. *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. London: Unwin Hyman. pp.11–44.
- Burgess, R.G. 1982. *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual*. London: Allen and Unwin. pp.163–7.
- Denzin, N. 2009. *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Hammersley, M. 1992. *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge. pp.1–22.
- Kolakowski, L. 1993. An Overall View of Positivism. In: M. Hammersley (ed.), *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice*. London: Sage. pp.1–8.
- Laurie, H. and Sullivan, O. 1990. Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Data in the Longitudinal Study of Household Allocations, *Sociological Review*, 39, 113–30.
- von Wright, G.H. 1993. Two Traditions. In: M. Hammersley (ed.), *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice*. London: Sage. pp.9–13.