

Research Methods: The Key Concepts

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This is the second edition of *Research Methods: The Key Concepts*, one in a series of key guides. In preparing this edition we have added 19 new entries, and we have revised and updated references to literature in nearly all of the others. The book provides a more comprehensive and up-to-date coverage of approaches taken in social research and the methods used to address research questions. The aim of this book, however, remains the same: to provide support for those undertaking their own social research projects. Each entry in the book provides an overview definition, or competing definitions of a concept, followed by a discussion of the part played by that concept in a research project. A wide range of research reporting is cited. This includes not only classic accounts such as Oscar Lewis's *The Sanchez Family*, Durkheim's *Suicide*, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but also a broad selection of recent studies, some written by new researchers, across many different fields and contexts. The book will be useful for higher-education students carrying out projects at the end of their first degree or during a master's programme, though many of the entries will be particularly helpful for those undertaking doctoral research, and some entries have been written with the production of a thesis in mind.

The book is titled *Research Methods*, but its scope goes beyond this. We do of course cover research design and particular methods of collecting and analysing data, for example questionnaire surveys, interviewing, observation and related activities such as coding, and inductive (or bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) approaches to analysis. We present a critical view of methods, setting out strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, making clear that there is not a simple formula to follow. However, we also raise wider issues including epistemological orientations to research, such as the nature of claims to reliability, trustworthiness and validity, and we consider stances such as constructionism, interpretivism, positivism, post-positivism, postmodernism and pragmatism. We are particularly concerned in this edition to say more about the role that theory plays in social research and have added further entries on conceptual frameworks, modelling, theoretical frameworks and extended the original entry on theory itself. The aim is to show that those undertaking social research need to engage more widely with how problems have been theorised if they are to make a distinctive

contribution to the field. In all the entries we aim to be even-handed, but we do express firm views where we feel a difficulty or limitation needs to be highlighted.

Entries are in alphabetical order and, where appropriate, cross-referenced by the use of bold, though this is done sparingly so as not to disrupt the reading of the text. An extended 'Short Bites' section is provided at the back of the book which contains brief definitions for terms which have come up within the entries themselves. These will help readers decode some of the research output cited throughout the guide.

Guides to social research are rarely read cover to cover, but we would encourage readers to visit at least some of the entries on concepts with which they are unfamiliar or of which they may be dismissive; the signposting will help. Of course many readers will prefer to dip into the book as and when they need to, and the alphabetical organisation makes this straightforward.

The second edition

Social research is changing all the time and a second edition has given an opportunity not only to reflect on shortcomings but to say something about the changing landscape of social research. Three things stand out.

First, there has been a much-needed weakening of the hold interpretivism and positivism has held over discussion of research methodology. Over the years we have read countless theses and dissertations with a few pages on the differences between interpretivism and positivism culminating in a statement of alignment with one or the other position (in small-scale case study, interpretivism became the default). Debates over epistemology do not need to be polarised in this way and there is now more than ever an appetite for setting out a middle ground. Such a middle ground recognises that it makes sense to identify patterns in social activity even though we should accept that any conclusions reached are fallible. Recent writing on critical realism, mixed methodology, post-positivism and pragmatism, as well as metaphors of crystallisation and bricolage help in clarifying where this epistemological debate is going.

Second, not only is the digital world increasingly researched, digital methods are being increasingly used. For example, it is relatively common to interview over Skype, the idea of an email interview no longer excites much comment, synchronous chat sometimes finds a place as does daily text messaging to get short but ecologically valid responses from participants. Nor is it

unusual to use tracking tools such as eye tracking glasses or GPS in certain types of research. More significantly there has been a step change in the use of big data – not just the very large data sets that many researchers have long used but online archives of, say, Twitter feeds and social network interaction. Digital methods may start out being a novelty, but their value is being increasingly established, albeit their use needs to be considered carefully, not least on ethical grounds.

Third, mainstream social research is no longer troubled to the same degree by postmodernist critics, and extreme scepticism about the trustworthiness of social research has run its day. Instead, the key challenge facing mainstream social researchers has become what to do about social justice. Of course a concern for social justice is not new and has long been reflected in feminist methodology and critical action research, but discussion has taken on a new urgency with demands for decolonising methodology and intersectionality to the forefront.

We wrote in the first edition that those conducting and supporting research were living in particularly exciting times: there was a spirit of innovation in social research, pluralism in research approaches and a concern to reflect the increasingly global nature of modern life. We welcome this and encourage new researchers to continue the process.

In our first edition we also noted that we are not reaching a saturation point in research; rather we are increasingly aware of just how much more there is to find out. This is true, but it is also true that we already know a lot. If there is one plea we would make to researchers is to go public with their work, i.e. to contribute to public debates, to engage responsibly with social media, to report findings to practitioners. It is easy to end a research project feeling that the questions have become stale and the findings obvious, but this simply comes from long engagement in the field. Others will find your research interesting and helpful as long as it is presented in appropriate ways. In addition to the conventional research report there is a place for blogs, drawings, even comic books to communicate to wider audiences. There is so much good work that has been ignored as it has not been communicated effectively.

List of full entries

access

action research

documentary research

ecological approaches

narrative enquiry

neuroimaging

agency	emic (and etic)	observation
analysis	epistemology	ontology
axiology	ethics	paradigm
behaviourism	ethnography	phenomenology
bias	evaluation research	positionality
big data	evidence-based practice	positivism
bricolage	experimental method	post-positivism
case study	explanation	postmodernism
causality	feminist methodology	pragmatism
chaos theory	game theory	qualitative methods
codes and coding	generalisability	quantitative methods
collaborative research	globalisation	questions
comparative research	grounded theory	reliability
concept	induction	research design
conceptual framework	interdisciplinarity	secondary data analysis
constructionism/ constructivism	interpretivism	shadowing
content analysis	intersectionality	survey
conversation analysis	interviewing	symbolic interactionism
critical realism	knowledge	systematic review
critical theory	life history	theoretical framework
criticality	literature review	theorising
crystallization	longitudinal studies	theory
decolonising methodology	meta-analysis	triangulation
deduction	metaphor	trustworthiness
delphi method	method	truth
description	methodology	validity
diaries	mixed methods	visual methods
discourse analysis	modelling	writing for audiences