SECOND EDITION

INTRODUCING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

UWE FLICK

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DOING A RESEARCH PROJECT

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WHY SOCIAL RESEARCH?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter is designed to help you:

- gain an introductory understanding of social research
- begin to see the similarities and differences between qualitative and quantitative research
- appreciate (a) the tasks social research has, (b) what social research can achieve, and (c) what aims you can achieve through it.

What is Social Research?

Increasingly, science and research – their approaches and results – inform public life. They help to provide a basis for political and practical decision-making. This applies across the range of sciences – not only to natural science and medicine, but to social science too. Our first task here is to clarify what is distinctive about social research.

Everyday life and science

Many of the issues and phenomena with which social research engages also play a role in everyday life. Consider, for example, one issue that is obviously highly relevant to everyday life, namely health. For the most part, health becomes an explicit

issue in everyday life only when health-related problems occur or are threatening individuals. Symptoms produce an urge to react and we start to look for solutions, causes and explanations. If necessary, we may go to see a doctor and maybe end up changing our habits and behaviors – for example, by taking more exercise.

This search for causes and explanations, and people's own experiences, often lead to the development of everyday theories (for example: 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away'). Such theories are not necessarily spelled out explicitly: they often remain implicit. The question of whether everyday explanations and theories are correct or not is usually tested pragmatically: do they contribute to solving problems and reducing symptoms or not? If such knowledge allows the problem at hand to be solved, it has fulfilled its purpose. Then it is not relevant whether such explanations apply to other people or in general. In this context, scientific knowledge (for example, that smoking increases the risk of cancer) is often picked up from the media.

Health, health problems and how people deal with them constitute issues for social research too. But in social science we take a different approach. Analysis of problems is foregrounded and study becomes more systematic. This aims at breaking up routines in order to prevent harmful behaviors – for example, the relation between specific behaviors (like smoking) and specific health problems (such as the likelihood of falling ill with cancer). To achieve such an aim, we need to create a situation free of pressure to act. For example, you will plan a longer period for analyzing the problem, without the pressure of immediately finding a solution for it. Here, knowledge results not from intuition, but from the examination of scientific theories. The development of such theories involves a process of explicitly spelling out and testing relations, which is based on using research methods (like a systematic review of the literature or a survey). For both aims – the developing and testing of theories – the methods of social research are used. The resulting knowledge is abstracted from the concrete example and further developed in the direction of general relations. Unlike in everyday life, here the generalization of knowledge is more important than solving a concrete problem in the particular case. Scientific research is more and more confronted with the expectation that its results have an impact on the field that is studied or on the way a society deals with an issue or (social) problem (see Chandler 2013; Denicolo 2013).

Everyday knowledge and problem-solving can of course become the starting points for theory development and empirical research. We may ask, for example, which types of everyday explanations for a specific disease can be identified in interviews with patients.

Table 1.2 presents the differences between everyday knowledge and practices on the one hand, and science and research on the other. It does so on three levels, namely (1) the context of knowledge development, (2) the ways of developing knowledge and the state of the knowledge which is produced, and (3) the mutual relations between everyday knowledge and science.

What, then, characterizes social research in dealing with such issues? Here we may itemize a number of characteristics, each of which is explored further in this book. They are:

- Social research approaches issues in a systematic and above all empirical way.
- For this purpose, you will develop research questions (see Chapter 4).
- For answering these questions, you will collect and analyze data.
- You will collect and analyze these data by using research methods (see Chapters 9 and 10).
- The results are intended to be generalized beyond the examples (cases, samples, etc.) that were studied (see Chapter 13).
- From the systematic use of research methods and their results, you will derive descriptions or explanations of the phenomena you study.
- For a systematic approach, time, freedom and (other) resources are necessary (see Chapter 6).

TABLE 1.2 Everyday knowledge and science

	Everyday knowledge and practices	**Science and research**
Context of knowledge (production)	Pressure to act Solving of problems is the priority: • routines are not put to question • reflection in case of practical problems	Relief from a pressure to act Analyzing of problems is the priority: • systematic analysis • routines are put to question and broken down
Ways of knowledge (production)	Intuition Implicit development of theories Experience-driven development of theories Pragmatic testing of theories Check of solutions for problems	Use of scientific theories Explicit development of theories Methods-driven development of theories Methods-based testing of theories Use of research methods
State of knowledge	Concrete, referring to the particular situations	Abstract and generalizing
Role of knowledge	Understanding and maybe problem-solving in concrete contexts and situations	Impact on social or societal problems and their solution
Relation of everyday knowledge and science	Everyday knowledge can be used as a starting point for theory development and empirical research	Everyday knowledge is increasingly influenced by scientific theories and results of research

As we shall see, there are different ways of doing social research. First, though, we can develop a preliminary general definition of social research derived from our discussion so far (see Box 1.1).

BOX 1.1

Definition of social research

Social research is the systematic analysis of research questions by using empirical methods (e.g. of asking, observing, analyzing data). Its aim is to make empirically grounded statements that can be generalized or to test such statements. Various approaches can be distinguished as can a number of fields of application (health, education, poverty, etc.). Various aims can be pursued, ranging from an exact description of a phenomenon to its explanation or to the evaluation of an intervention or institution.

The Tasks of Social Research

We can distinguish three main tasks for social research. To do so, we use the criterion of how the results of social research may be used.

Knowledge: description, understanding and explanation of phenomena

A central task of social research originates from scientific interests, which means that the production of knowledge is prioritized. Once a new phenomenon, such as a new disease, arises, a detailed description of its features (symptoms, progression, frequency, etc.) on the basis of data and their analysis becomes necessary. The first step can be a detailed description of the circumstances under which it occurs or an analysis of the subjective experiences of the patients. This will help us to understand the contexts, effects and meanings of the disease. Later, we can look for concrete explanations and test which factors trigger the symptoms or the disease, which circumstances or medications have specific influences on its course, etc. For these three steps – (a) description, (b) understanding and (c) explanation – the scientific interest in new knowledge is dominant. Such research contributes to basic research in that area. Here, science and scientists remain the target group for the research and its results.

Practice-oriented research: applied and participative research

Increasingly, social research is being conducted in practical contexts such as hospitals and schools. Here, research questions focus on practices – those of teachers, nurses or physicians – in institutions. Or they focus on the specific conditions of work in these institutions – routines in the hospital or teacher–student relations, for example. The results of applied research of this kind are also produced according to rules of scientific analysis. However, they should become relevant for the practice field and for the solution of problems in practice.

A special case here is participatory action research. Here, the changes initiated by the researcher in the field of study do not come only after the end of the study and the communication of its results. The intention is rather to initiate change *during* the process of research and by the very fact that the study is being done. Take, for example, a study of nursing with migrants. A participatory action research study would not set out merely to describe the everyday routines of nursing with migrants. Rather, it would initiate the process of research immediately in those everyday routines. It would then feed back to participants the information gathered in the research process.

This changes the relationship between researcher and participant. A relation which is usually monologic in traditional research (e.g. the interviewees unfold

their views, the researchers listen) becomes dialogic (the interviewees unfold their views, the researchers listen and make suggestions for how to change the situation). A subject–object relation turns into a relation between two subjects – the researcher and the participant. The evaluation of the research and its results is no longer focused solely on the usual scientific criteria (as will be discussed in Chapter 13). Rather, the question of the usefulness of the research and its results for the participant becomes a main criterion. Research is no longer just a knowledge process for the researchers, but rather a process of knowledge, learning and change on both sides.

Basis for political and practical decisions

Since the middle of the twentieth century, social research has become more important as a basis for decisions in practical and political contexts. In most countries, regular surveys in various areas are common practice; reports on health, on poverty and on the situation of the elderly and of youth and children are produced, often commissioned by government. In many cases, such monitoring does not involve extra research, but rather summarizes existing research and results in the field. But, as the PISA studies or the HBSC study (Hurrelmann et al. 2003) show, in areas like health, education and youth, additional studies do sometimes contribute to the basis of these reports. In the HBSC study, representative data about 11- to 15-year-old adolescents in the population are collected. At the same time, case studies with purposefully selected cases are included. Where data from representative studies are not available or cannot be expected, sometimes only case studies provide the data basis.

In many areas, decisions about establishing, prolonging or continuing services, programs or institutions are based on evaluations of existing examples or experimental programs. Here, social research not only provides data and results as a basis for decisions, but also makes assessments and evaluations – by, for example, examining whether one type of school is more successful in reaching its goals than a different type. Therefore, the potential for implementation of research results, and more generally the impact of research beyond academia, become more important. Chandler (2013, p. 3) states:

> The context within which that impact takes place is broad beyond academia in the realms of society, economy, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life. The outcomes or indicators of impact encompass the individual, community or global levels and are the application of new knowledge or understanding in the development of policy, creation of products or services.

Table 1.3 summarizes the tasks and research areas of social research outlined above, using the context of health as an example.

TABLE 1.3 Tasks and research areas of social research

Research area	Features	Aims	Example	Studies refer to
Basic research	Development or testing of theories	General statements without a specific link to practices	Trust in social relationships	Random sample of students or unspecific groups
Applied research	Development or testing of theories in practical fields	Statements referring to the particular field Implementation of results	Trust in doctor–patient relations	Doctors and patients in a specific field
Participatory action research	Analyzing fields and changing them at the same time	Intervention in the field under study	Analysis and improvement of nursing for migrants	Patients with a specific ethnic background, for example, who are (not sufficiently) supported by existing home care services
Evaluation	Collection and analysis of data as a basis for assessing the success and failure of an intervention	Assessment of institutional services and changes	Improvement of the trust relations between doctors and patients in a specific field with better information	Patients in a specific field
Health monitoring	Documentation of health-related data	Stocktaking of developments and changes in the health status of the population	Frequencies of occupational diseases	Routine data of health insurance

What Can You Achieve with Social Research?

In the areas just mentioned, we can use social research to:

- explore issues, fields and phenomena and provide first descriptions
- discover new relations by collecting and analyzing data
- provide empirical data and analyses as a basis for developing theories
- test existing theories and stocks of knowledge empirically
- document the effects of interventions, treatments, programs, etc. in an empirically based way
- provide knowledge (i.e. data, analyses and results) as an empirically grounded basis for political, administrative and practical decision-making.

What is social research unable to do and what can you do with it?

Social research has its limits. For example, the aim of developing a single grand theory to explain society and the phenomena within it, which also withstands

empirical testing, could not be achieved. And there is no one method for studying all relevant phenomena. Moreover, social research cannot be relied upon to provide immediate solutions for current, urgent problems. On all three levels, we have to rein in our expectations of social research and pursue more realistic aims.

What we can aim to do is develop, and even test empirically, a number of theories. They can be used to explain certain social phenomena. We can also continue to develop a range of social science methods. Researchers can then select the appropriate methods and apply them to the problems they wish to study. Finally, social research provides knowledge about details and relations, which can be employed to develop solutions for societal problems.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research

We need now turn to the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. This distinction will feature frequently throughout this book. The notions of 'qualitative research' and 'quantitative research' are umbrella terms for a number of approaches, methods and theoretical backgrounds on each side. That is, each of these two terms in fact covers a wide range of procedures, methods and approaches. Nevertheless, they are useful. Here, therefore, we develop an outline of the two approaches (for more details, see Bryman 2008 and Flick 2014a) and consider what characterizes each.

Quantitative research

Quantitative research can be characterized as follows. In studying a phenomenon (e.g. the stress of students), you will start from a concept (e.g. a concept of stress), which you spell out theoretically beforehand (e.g. in a model of stress, which you set up or take from the literature). For the empirical study, you will formulate a hypothesis (or several hypotheses), which you will test (e.g. that for students in humanities, university is more stressful than for students in the natural sciences). In the empirical project, the procedure of measurement has high relevance for finding out differences among persons concerning the characteristics you study (e.g. there are students with more and less stress).

In most cases, we cannot expose a theoretical concept immediately to measurement. Rather, we have to find indicators that permit a measurement in place of the concept. We may say that the concept has to be *operationalized* in these indicators. In our example, you could operationalize stress before an exam by using physiological indicators (e.g. higher blood pressure) and then apply blood pressure measurements. More often, researchers operationalize research through using specific questions (e.g. 'Before exams, I often feel under pressure') with specific alternatives of answering (as in the example in Figure 1.1).

Data collection is designed in a standardized way (e.g. all participants in a study may be interviewed under the same circumstances and in the same way). The methodological ideal is the kind of scientific measurement achieved in the natural

FIGURE 1.1 Alternatives for answering on Likert scale

sciences. By standardization of the data collection and of the research situation, the criteria of reliability, validity and objectivity (see Chapter 13) can be met.

Quantitative research is interested in causalities – for example, in showing that stress before an exam is caused by the exam and not by other circumstances. Therefore, you will create a situation for your research in which the influences of other circumstances can be excluded as far as possible. For this purpose, instruments are tested for the consistency of their measurement, such as in repeated applications. The aim of the study is to achieve generalizable results: that is, your results should be valid beyond the situation in which they were measured (the students also feel the stress or have the higher blood pressure before exams when they are not studied for research purposes). The results from the group of students that participated need to be transferable to students in general. Therefore, you will draw a sample, which you select according to criteria of representativeness – the ideal case is a random sample (see Chapter 7 for this) – from the population of all students. This will mean that you can generalize from the sample to the population. Thus, the particular participants are relevant not as individuals (how does the student Joe Bauer experience stress before exams?) but rather as typical examples. It is not so much the students' entire situation, but rather their specific (e.g. physiological) reactions to a certain condition (a coming exam) that are relevant.

The emphasis on measurement, as in the natural sciences, relates to an important research aim, namely replicability – i.e. the measurement has principally to be able to be repeated, and then, provided the object under examination has not itself changed, to produce the same results. In our example: if you measure blood pressure for the same student before the exam repeatedly, the measured values must be the same – except if there are good reasons for a difference, such as if blood pressure rises as the exam gets closer.

Quantitative research works with numbers. To return to our example: because measurement produces a specific figure for blood pressure, the alternatives for answering in Figure 1.1 can be transformed into numbers from 1 to 5. These numbers make a statistical analysis of the data possible (see Bryman 2008 for a more detailed presentation of these features of quantitative research). Kromrey (2006, p. 34) defines the 'strategy of the so-called quantitative research' as 'a strictly goal-oriented procedure, which aims for the "objectivity" of its results by a standardization of all steps as far as possible and which postulates intersubjective verifiability as the central norm for quality assurance'.

The participants may experience the research situation as follows. They are relevant as members of a specific group, from which they were selected randomly. They are

confronted with a number of predefined questions, for which they also have a number of predefined answers, of which they are expected to choose only one. Information beyond these answers, as well as their own assumptions, subjective states or queries and comments on the questions or the issue, are not part of the research situation.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research sets itself other priorities. Here, you normally do not necessarily start from a theoretical model of the issue you study and refrain from hypotheses and operationalization. Also, qualitative research is not modeled on measurement as found in the natural sciences. Finally, you will be interested neither in standardizing the research situation as far as possible nor in guaranteeing representativeness by the random sampling of participants.

Instead, qualitative researchers select participants purposively and integrate small numbers of cases according to their relevance. Data collection is designed much more openly and aims at a comprehensive picture made possible by reconstructing the case under study. Thus, fewer questions and answers are defined in advance; there is greater use of open questions. The participants are expected to answer these questions spontaneously and in their own words. Often, researchers work with narratives of personal life histories.

Qualitative research addresses issues by using one of the following three approaches. It aims (a) at grasping the subjective meaning of issues from the perspectives of participants (e.g. what does it mean for interviewees to experience their university studies as a burden?). Often, (b) latent meanings of a situation are in focus (e.g. which are the unconscious aspects or the underlying conflicts that influence the experience of stress for the student?). It is less relevant to study a cause and its effect than to describe or reconstruct the complexity of situations. In many cases, (c) social practices and the life world of participants are described. The aim is less to test what is known (e.g. an existing theory or hypothesis) than to discover new aspects in the situation under study and to develop hypotheses or a theory from these discoveries. Therefore, the research situation is not standardized; rather it is designed to be as open as possible. A few cases are studied, but these are analyzed extensively in their complexity. Generalization is an aim not so much on a statistical level (generalization to the level of the population, for example) as on a theoretical level (for a more detailed presentation of these features, see Flick 2014a).

The participants in a study may experience the research situation as follows. They are involved in the study as individuals, who are expected to contribute their experiences and views from their particular life situations. There is scope for what they see as essential, for approaching questions differently and for providing different kinds of answers with different levels of detail. The research situation is designed more as a dialogue, in which probing, new aspects, and their own estimations find their place.

Differences between quantitative and qualitative research

From the above outlines of features of both approaches, some of the main differences in assessing what is under study (issue, field and persons) have become evident. These are summarized in Table 1.4.

TABLE 1.4 Differences between quantitative and qualitative research

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Theory	As a starting point to be tested	As an end point to be developed
Case selection	Oriented on (statistical) representativeness, ideally random sampling	Purposive according to the theoretical fruitfulness of the case
Data collection	Standardized	Open
Analysis of data	Statistical	Interpretative
Generalization	In a statistical sense to the population	In a theoretical sense

Common aspects of quantitative and qualitative research

Despite the differences, the two approaches have some points in common. In both approaches, you:

- work systematically by using empirical methods (see Chapters 9 and 10)
- aim at generalizing your findings – to situations other than the research situation and to persons other than participants in the study (see Chapter 13)
- pursue certain research questions, for which the selected methods should be appropriate (see Chapter 4)
- should answer these questions using a planned and systematic procedure (see Chapter 6)
- have to check your process of research for ethical acceptability and appropriateness (see Chapter 3)
- have to make your process of research transparent (i.e. understandable for the reader) in presenting the results and the ways that lead to them (see Chapter 14).

Advantages and disadvantages

An advantage of quantitative research is that it allows for the study of a large number of cases for certain aspects in a relatively short time frame and its results have a high degree of generalizability. The disadvantage is that the aspects that are studied are not necessarily the relevant aspects for participants and the context of the meanings linked to what is studied cannot be sufficiently taken into account.

An advantage of qualitative research is that detailed and exact analyses of a few cases can be produced, in which participants have much more freedom to determine what is relevant for them and to present it in its contexts. The disadvantage is

that these analyses often require a lot of time and you can generalize results to the broad masses in only a very limited way.

Synergies and combinations

The strengths and weaknesses just mentioned provide a basis for deciding which methodological alternative you should select for your specific research question (see Chapter 8). At the same time, we should remember that it is possible to combine qualitative and quantitative research (as is explored in more detail in Chapter 12) with the aim of compensating for the limitations and weaknesses of each approach and producing synergies between them.

Doing Research On-site and Doing it Online

In the last decade or so, a new trend has arisen which has considerably extended the reach of social research. With the development of the Internet, both qualitative and quantitative approaches can now be used in new contexts.

Traditionally, interviews, surveys and observations have mostly been done on-site. You make appointments with your participants, meet them at a specific time and location, and interact with them face to face or send them your questionnaire by mail and they return it in the same way. This kind of research has its limitations. Sometimes, practical reasons will make these encounters difficult: participants live far away, are not ready to meet researchers, or are relevant for your study as members of a virtual community.

These limitations can sometimes be overcome if you decide to do your study online. Quantitative and qualitative methods have been adapted to online research. E-mail or online interviews, online surveys and virtual ethnography are now part of the methodological toolkit of social researchers. This means not so much (or, at least, not only) that you apply social science methods to study (the use of) the Internet, but rather that you use the Internet to apply your methods for answering your research questions. In particular, the new forms of communication in the context of Web 2.0 provide new options for communicating in and about social research. They also facilitate doing research collaboratively (see Chapter 11 for details).

Why and How Research Can Be Fun

For many students, completing courses in research methods and statistics seems to be nothing more than an unpleasant duty; it seems you have to go through this, even if you do not know why and for what purpose. To learn methods can be exhausting and painful. If the whole enterprise leads to a difficult written test at the end, sometimes any excitement is submerged by the stress of the exam. To apply methods can be time-consuming and challenging.

However, the systematic nature of the procedures and the concrete access to practical issues in empirical research in your studies and later in professional work (as a sociologist, social worker and the like) may provide new information. You may discover new insights in the analysis of your data. Interviews, life histories or participant observation can reveal much about concrete life situations or about how institutions function. Sometimes these insights come as surprises, which may give you the chance to overcome your prejudices and limited perspectives on how people live and work. And you will learn a lot about how life histories develop or about what happens in practical work in institutions or in the field.

In most research processes, you will learn a lot not only about the participants, but also about yourself – especially if you work with issues such as health, stress at university, the impact of social discrimination, etc. in concrete life situations. In particular, in the context of theoretically ambitious studies and their contents, working with empirical data can form not only an instructive alternative or complement to theory, but also a concrete link between theory and everyday real-life problems.

Working with other people can be an enriching experience, and if you have the chance to do your research among a group of people – a research team or a group of students – that will be a good way out of the isolation students sometimes experience. For many students, work with technical devices, computers, programs and data can be satisfying and a lot of fun. For example, using the communication forms in Web 2.0 for research purposes will provide new experiences of social networking and being up to date in the context of using new media in a professional way. And in the end you will have concrete products at hand: examples, results, what they have in common and how they are different for a variety of people, and so on.

Finally, to work on an empirical project requires working on one issue in a sustained way. This is good practice, given that many students' experiences today are characterized more by 'bits and pieces' work. Empirical research in your fields of study can also be a test of how much you like those fields. If the test ends positively, it can reassure you in your decision to become, for example, a social worker or a psychologist.

Orientation in the Field of Social Research

Knowledge about social research helps in two ways. It can provide the starting point and basis for doing your own empirical study, such as in the context of a thesis or of later professional work in sociology, education, social work, etc. And it is also necessary for understanding and assessing existing research and perhaps for being able to build an argument on such research. For both, we can formulate a number of guideline questions, which allow a basic assessment of research (in the planning of your own or reading other researchers' studies). These are shown in Box 1.2.

BOX 1.2

Guideline questions for an orientation in the field of social research

1. What is studied exactly?
   - What is the issue and what is the research question of the study?
2. How is it assured that the research really investigates what is supposed to be studied?
   - How is the study planned, which design is applied or constructed, and how are biases prevented?
3. What is represented in what is studied?
   - Which claims of generalization are made and how are they fulfilled?
4. Is the execution of the study ethically sound and theoretically grounded?
   - How are participants protected from any misuse of the data referring to them?
   - What is the theoretical perspective of the study?
5. Which methodological claims are made and fulfilled?
   - Which criteria are applied?
6. Does the presentation of results and of the ways they were produced make transparent for the reader how the results came about and how the researchers proceeded?
   - Is the study transparent and consistent in its presentation?
7. Is the chosen procedure convincing?
   - Are the design and methods appropriate for the issue under study?
8. Does the study achieve the degree of generalization that was expected?

These guideline questions can be asked regardless of the specific methodology that has been chosen and can be applied to the various methodological alternatives. They are relevant for both qualitative and quantitative studies and can be used for assessing a case study, as well as for a representative survey of the population of a country. They offer a framework for observations as well as for interviewing or for the use of existing data and documents (see Chapter 9 for more detail on this).

Key Points

- **Social research is more systematic in its approach than everyday knowledge.**
- **Social research can have various tasks: research may be focused on knowledge, practice and consulting.**
- **Quantitative research and qualitative research offer different approaches. Each has strengths and limitations in what can be studied.**

- Quantitative and qualitative research can mutually complement each other.
- Both quantitative and qualitative research can be applied on-site and online.
- We can identify common features across the various approaches.

Further Reading

The first and fifth texts listed below provide further detail on quantitative research and include some chapters on qualitative methods, too. The second, third and fourth books give more insight into the variety of qualitative research methods.

Bryman, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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