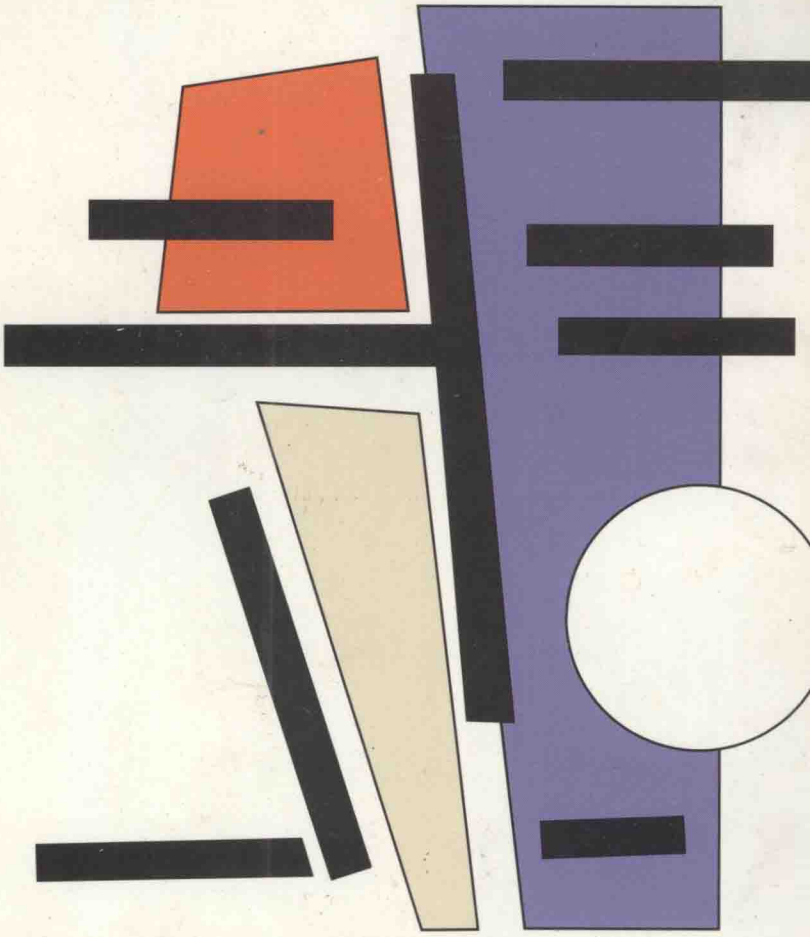
Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott



RESEARCH METHODS FOR NURSES AND THE CARING PROFESSIONS

Research methods for nurses and the caring professions

Roger Sapsford and
Pamela Abbott

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MK18 1XW

and
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Preface

This is a book on the appreciation and evaluation of other people's research and on the conduct of your own. It stands by itself, but may also be read in conjunction with Pamela Abbott and Roger Sapsford (1992) *Research into Practice: a reader for nurses and the caring professions*, published by Open University Press, which contains many of the examples which are discussed here. One of the book's main aims is to 'de-mystify' research – to distinguish the often complex techniques from the basically fairly simple logic which underlies research projects. The focus is explicitly on *social* research: we shall not be attempting to cover research methods in biology nor research into the efficacy of drugs. The principles are the same, however (except that social research tends to face more complex questions, because of the great variability of its subjects and the fact that the researcher is a part of the social world which he or she is investigating). Most of the examples are small-scale studies, in the sense that they could be (and in many cases were) carried out by one or two people rather than large and well resourced teams. We give particular emphasis to evaluative research of various kinds and the attempt to assess the efficacy of one's own professional practice.

Part of the target audience for this book is the nursing profession – people taking nursing degrees and diplomas, people taking post-qualificatory diplomas and certificates, and practising nurses who want to undertake research or the evaluation of their practice. For this reason a good proportion of the examples are based around the concepts of health and treatment. The book is also appropriate, however, for other community and institutional practitioners, and trainees – for example, social workers, family workers, community workers. The intended level is introductory and you should not imagine that reading it will fully equip you to carry out research of all kinds. There should be enough here to get you started, however, and the rest comes with practice, further reading and competent supervision by others who are already experienced.

The book falls into four sections. The first chapter is a 'mini-course',

looking at most of the major ways of collecting data and structuring research and evaluation, and raising many of the issues to which you will come back again and again as you progress through the book. Chapters 2–7 are about reading and evaluating other people's research – Chapter 2 is about the structure of research reports in general, and the others each take a type of research design and examine it through two or three major projects which have used it. Then Chapters 8–14 are on various aspects of the practice of research. The examples range more widely here, but some of them will be taken from the kinds of project that have been carried out by students and could be carried out by you. Finally, there is a chapter on the writing of research reports, and a final summary chapter which also raises and pulls together more fundamental questions about ideology, discourse and the way in which the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life are also taken for granted in research and evaluation studies.

We have provided practical exercises to back up the text wherever we can. If you are able to fit them into your lives, we strongly recommend trying to carry out the exercises, at the point at which they occur in the text; no amount of descriptive rhetoric is as illuminating as even a small-scale attempt at actually *doing* the research. The exercises are often quite short. Many of them either take no real time at all – they are fitted into time that you would be spending travelling from one place to another, for example – or can be accomplished in 10–20 minutes. Very few of them require any special arrangements or disturbance to your life, except when it is required that you ask someone direct questions, in which case you have to line up someone who is prepared to answer them – often a spouse, or friend or working colleague. (The 'taken-for-granted' in the exercises is that you are able to leave the home in order to go to work or to the shops. If you are entirely housebound then you may need to modify some of them, e.g. observing family interaction rather than the interactions in shops or hospitals, but the exercises so modified will still make the points for which they were designed.) The exercises provided in Chapters 1 and 8–14 are practical activities. In Chapters 3–7 the exercises involve reading and commenting on particular research reports. These may mostly be obtained in academic libraries, or all of them may be found in Abbott and Sapsford (1992), the Reader mentioned above.

Various of the chapters also end with 'Further Reading'. This is not necessary for the understanding of the text, but is intended to expand your horizons beyond what we have written. In Chapters 3–7 the 'Further Reading' suggests other articles or books you might like to examine if the subject area of one of the examples is particularly relevant to your interests or to your area of professional expertise – in other words, to research which you might be interested in carrying out. In Chapters 8–14 we mostly suggest further textbooks or articles, which offer a more detailed treatment than space permits here, of the relevant research techniques, plus a few studies worth reading because they use non-standard and imaginative ways of applying the method. These are not 'required' reading for the chapters, but additional material you will find useful if you go on to do research for yourself in the relevant area and/or style.

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Finally, we should acknowledge our colleagues at the Open University, Polytechnic South West and elsewhere, with whom we have been teaching this material and discussing these issues over a long period of years. We are not aware of having 'borrowed' any of their ideas, but all academic work is an unacknowledged collaboration, and we have benefited greatly from having talked and worked with them. We can at least be sure, however, that the mistakes and unorthodoxies are mostly our own.

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Section 1

Introduction

1

Finding out and making sense

'Research' is often presented as something mysterious and technical, something beyond the capability of those who have not undergone long training. It is what is done by scientists, it requires the use of computers and abstruse mathematics, and ordinary untrained people sometimes cannot even understand the questions, let alone the answers. However, 'doing research' is just an extension of what we all do in our daily lives. We are continually coming to conclusions on the basis of what we experience plus what we knew already – to recognize something as a tree, or a postbox or a person is to take knowledge which we have already and apply it to what appears to be in front of us. We all have occasion, every day, to try to find out more about something in order to act more appropriately – to look up an address, to take a closer look at the tree, to explore whether this person is really to be trusted. When something puzzles us and we cannot quite make it out, we generally set about looking for evidence about it which will help us to make sense of it. The researcher does no more. Research starts as an extension of common sense – finding out about things, looking for information about them, trying to make sense of them in the light of evidence and working out what evidence is needed.

Common sense has its limitations, however, which the researcher tries to overcome. In our everyday thinking and decision-making we often act on poor evidence. Indeed, we *have* to do so; events will not wait until the evidence is in, even if we were prepared to collect it. We come to quite hasty judgements about people, for instance, on the basis of one incident; we classify them as sympathetic or unsympathetic on the basis of how they behave when we first meet them, and behave accordingly. We judge whole classes of people on the basis of single examples. Common sense is full of 'facts' for which it has little or no evidence. What has been heard on the radio or television, or in the pub or the bus-queue, or what is believed and announced by opinion leaders such as politicians, churchmen or scientists, becomes 'the truth' without further examination. Finally, common sense is influenced by a wide range of

stereotypes and ideological presuppositions of which we are hardly ever aware. Our attitudes to the stranger, to the deviant minority, to those who might be seen as attacking our interests, are so well rooted as to be often impervious to the penetration of logic and evidence. The way we view the world is itself often open to question. Our acceptance of our particular culture's construction of social class, gender and age as supposedly innate or inevitable stratifying principles, together with all the assumptions about people and their wants and needs which these entail, are taken for granted as common sense.

Good research tries not to take for granted what is taken for granted by common sense. It tries to argue rigorously, according to the 'rules of evidence' which we shall be exploring in the rest of this book. At the same time, it requires a degree of imagination, and the power to put the taken-for-granted to one side and 'make the familiar strange'. It is not the *techniques* of research which make it hard work, as you will see in the rest of this book, but the strain of trying to see topic areas simultaneously from all possible angles.

This chapter begins the book with a brief and cursory review of a wide variety of research activities, organized around the ideas of 'looking to see what is going on', 'asking questions' and 'trying something out'. We shall mostly be concerned here with questions of structure in research – structure in the way that questions are asked, or observations or measurements carried out, and structure in the sense of planned comparison between one group and another to illuminate their differences. These are two dimensions along which research studies may differ. (A third major factor – how typicality or representativeness is guaranteed so that you can assert that what is true in the research context is true of the wider population – is left for consideration elsewhere in the book.)

Research is carried out for a wide variety of audiences. Much of what people think of as research – the kind of work carried out by 'researchers' – is to do with the evaluation of new or existing practices. Research is carried out to evaluate the outcome of a policy initiative or the functioning of an existing policy. For example, there will be a fair amount of research published in the next few years on how cash-limited budgets affect the general practice of medicine, and on the functioning of hospitals before and after opting to become 'hospital trusts'. In today's political climate of 'value for money', research is undoubtedly also being carried out into the effectiveness of the health visitor policy of doing home visits to all homes with young children and on whether the expense is justified by what they do there. The effectiveness of treatments is evaluated by controlled research projects: the use of these is most obvious in the clinical trial of new drugs, but similar projects have also been run on the effectiveness of forms of psychological counselling, the introduction of new nursing practices and on innovations in social work practice. 'Before-and-after' projects are also carried out on social innovations (changes in forms of welfare benefits, for example) and gross demographic changes such as the increased life-span of the population (on the 'clients' who are affected by them and the work of the professionals who try to help them).

A second major audience for research is the academic world. Much research

is carried out not with the immediate aim of informing policy or practice, but to build an understanding of the field of study and to test theories about it which are derived from more general sociological, psychological or economic models of how the social world is structured and how people function within it. Much of the classic work on health inequalities by region, class and gender, for example, may have been commissioned by government or more local authorities, but has as its aim the discovery of factors associated with poor health and specifically whether the state of health of a group is more affected by their personal actions or by their position within society as defined by structural variables, such as class, gender and material deprivation. (This kind of research blurs into the more 'practical' work discussed in the last paragraph, of course; much social theory is directly concerned with the implementation of social policy.)

A third kind of work involves the evaluation of professional practice. (A fourth kind, less often thought of as 'research', but requiring all the same techniques, is the work of *self*-evaluation.) Research techniques can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of our own practice or that of others, and to test the effects of altering some aspect of it. They can be used to explore the wants and needs of client groups, so that practice can be better informed. They can be used in a vaguer but still rigourous way just 'to find out a bit more about' client groups and working environments, to see if any ideas are generated which may be of use in our practice. This is something we all do without thinking of ourselves as 'carrying out research', but we can do it better if we apply a little rigour and logic. In many ways what distinguishes research from the commonsense use of argument and evidence is a certain 'cast of mind' – an openness to evidence and a distrust of presuppositions, even when taking this critical stance can be personally uncomfortable. When evaluating the work of others – whether their usual way of doing things or some innovative technique – we must clearly be seen to pass judgement fairly, without preconceived ideas, and on the basis of evidence.

In the rest of this chapter we shall be looking at some of the main ways in which evidence is gathered – observation, asking questions, and controlled trials. Practical exercises are provided for you to carry out, and you should endeavour to find time for them if you possibly can; words on paper are no kind of substitute for actually doing some practical work and experiencing both the pleasures of research and its difficulties. If possible, the practical activities should be carried out at the point in the chapter at which they occur, as the experience of them often acts to introduce or reinforce some teaching point which we want to make.

Observation

The most obvious way of getting to know a situation is to go and observe it, and observation is a major way by which research data are collected. Just how to *do* observation, however, is not quite as obvious as it might at first appear. Events are not just 'there' for us to note as if we were cameras taking pictures.

On the contrary, in a sense we construct our world as we observe it, seeing what we do as a result of the knowledge which we already have. The same 'event' could be a parent disciplining a child in one frame of observation, a case of child abuse in another, and a piece of play-acting in a third. It could also be analysed in terms of local norms of parental discipline, patterns of communication or even patterns of physical movement. (One can – just about! – imagine a sports physiotherapist who was more interested in whether the muscles of the arm were working smoothly than in whether the hand was causing pain.) Similarly, there are many different ways of observing in research, good for different purposes and with different drawbacks.

Exercises 1–6: Observation

These exercises will take about 30 minutes, not including time spent taking notes. They do not have to be done all at once; they are split up into 5-minute 'sessions', and each session could be done on a different day if that were more convenient for you.

Find yourself somewhere where the general public gather for some purpose and interact with someone who is in some kind of service or regulatory role. If you work in a hospital or general medical practice or in a social services department you may be able to observe a 'reception area' where people wait around for their appointments. If you are a health visitor you may be able to do your observation in a clinic. Parents may be able to observe other parents at 'mums and toddlers' groups. Otherwise, a good location is a large self-service shop where people take their own goods from shelves and queue at a cash-desk to pay for them. Whatever the location, you want somewhere where you can stand around for 5 minutes at a time without drawing attention to yourself; those under observation must not know that you are observing, and if you are observing in a shop you will not want to be suspected as a potential shop-lifter.

All the sessions require you to take notes. For the first two you will want to go away somewhere to do this – sit outside, or go and have a cup of coffee. The others require you to record numbers of various kinds, so you will need to take notes while actually doing the observation. Work out how to do this unobtrusively beforehand – in a small notebook, perhaps, or on what might be taken for a shopping list, or on a magazine or the margins of a book.

Exercise 1

Spend 5 minutes just looking round and seeing what is going on in general. At the end of the 5 minutes, go and sit down somewhere, and write some notes on what you have seen – not more than a page, but at least eight or ten lines, describing what was going on.

Exercise 2

Spend another 5 minutes focusing on the cashier or receptionist (without attracting his or her attention), looking at how he or she deals with people, how the people behave and whether they appear satisfied, disconcerted or annoyed by the

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