

Researching **SOCIAL
LIFE** *Researching*

Researching

EDITED BY **NIGEL GILBERT**

RESEARCHING SOCIAL LIFE

edited by

Nigel Gilbert



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Introduction

Nigel Gilbert

Researching social life is partly about having the right knowledge: for instance, how to design samples, when to take fieldnotes and how to analyse interview data; and partly about practical skills: how to lay out questionnaires, how to get access to historical archives and how to get the cooperation of an interviewee. It is because research is such a mixture that this book includes chapters which touch on philosophy and theory as well as more down-to-earth 'exemplars' which recount the problems and false starts of real research projects.

The book is organised around the idea of the research process – roughly, deciding what you want to find out, finding a setting or a sample, collecting some data, analysing the data and writing up the results. Thus, the book is subdivided into parts, on 'Beginnings', 'Into the field', 'Back home' and 'Endings'. But as the story of an actual research project in chapter 3 makes clear, the process can be a lot messier than is implied by this image of a steady progression through clear stages.

As a first step, however, it is important to clarify what counts as social research, and, in particular, how it differs from 'fact gathering'. In the first chapter, it is argued that social research has to be concerned with **understanding**, not just with description. Moreover, social research has to be located within an academic discipline – sociology, education, management, social work or whatever – which offers perspectives, methods and a 'tradition'. The final chapter, chapter 16, returns to these concerns.

Chapter 2 introduces some of the **conceptual tools** which a researcher will need. It is concerned with the link between theory and data – a link which continues to trouble philosophers as well as sociologists. Do data exist 'out there', waiting to be collected by the researcher? Or is what we find influenced or even determined by the theories and the methods we employ to understand the social world?

Chapter 2 and most of the following chapters conclude with a project which can be carried out by yourself or with others with minimal resources and in a reasonably short time. These projects are important because it is difficult to become a good researcher simply by reading about research; you need to have a go yourself. Every chapter also includes a list of 'Further reading' which suggests where to look for a deeper or more extended treatment of the issues it covers.

Practical experience of research skills is emphasised in chapter 3, which illustrates the **life history of research** through a detailed account of one

research project. This project aimed to find out more about 'housing mobility', that is, the pattern of moves between different forms of housing tenure. The project was based on a social survey of 1,000 council tenants in one local authority and exemplifies the practical, political and managerial issues which are frequently encountered in research projects.

These first three chapters offer an overview of the research process. The next two chapters are concerned with issues which have to be considered before one starts collecting data: how to get access to data sources and how to select whom to interview or observe. Social research is not always welcomed in all quarters and this means that researchers have to make decisions about whether they conceal what they are doing from some or all of their respondents ('covert' research) or whether they will be open about their objectives but risk being repulsed. And some groups are much more capable of resisting enquiries than others. These questions of **access**, which also involve difficult problems of research **ethics**, are addressed in chapter 4.

Once access has been gained, it is usually neither practicable nor wise to interview everyone and observe everything. Some kind of sampling of data is needed, regardless of whether the research is survey based or involves observational or documentary methods. Chapter 5 discusses the standard ways of obtaining **representative samples**, and considers whether representativeness is always necessary and appropriate.

Once decisions about access and sampling have been made, it is time to go 'into the field'. Chapters 6 to 10 examine various ways of collecting data. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were great advances in the 'technology' of asking standardised questions to representative samples of respondents. This had the result that the interview survey became the data collection technique most closely associated with social research. Chapter 6 discusses the current state of the art, offering advice about how to construct, not just **interview schedules**, but also questions for interviewing over the telephone, and questionnaires for surveys sent through the mail. Chapter 7 deals in more detail with one of the trickiest aspects of this style of research: how to measure people's **attitudes**.

Although using structured interviews is a common method of data collection, especially in commercial and policy related research, less formalised and more qualitative methods are also very important. Chapter 8 is about the kind of **focused interview** which is more like a guided conversation and deals with how to construct an interview guide, how to conduct an interview and how to transcribe a recording. Focused interviewing is often combined with observation of people in their 'natural' settings, a style of research called ethnography. **Ethnography**, as a research technique, emerged from anthropology and chapter 9 traces this history, considering also the practicalities of ethnographic research and, in particular, some methods of analysis of ethnographic data, since it is at the analysis stage that this style of research presents the most difficulties.

Chapter 9 is followed by the first of three 'Exemplar' chapters, each of

which show how the advice presented elsewhere in the book turns out in practice, in actual research projects. Exemplar A describes the course of an ethnographic research project concerned with the carers of sufferers from Alzheimer's disease. This project lasted only a few months, was carried out without any funding, yet yielded findings of considerable significance for social policy and illustrates that worthwhile research does not have to be large scale nor have ambitious objectives.

Not all social research involves asking people questions. Many of the classics of sociology were based solely on **documentary evidence**, the topic of chapter 10. The documents of interest to social researchers include not only public documents such as official reports and newspapers, but also personal records such as diaries and letters, and some objects which, although they document social life, were never intended as records, for example, statutes, novels, photographs and even buildings. The second Exemplar (B) shows how documents, including minutes of meetings, financial accounts, and the style and architecture of the headquarters of professional bodies in England, were all used as evidence for a study of the institutionalisation of professional associations.

The result of collecting data in any of these ways is likely to be a mass of material, too great in quantity to be analysed unless one is prepared and able to be systematic. The management of quantitative data has been revolutionised by the computer, and computers are now also beginning to be used to assist in handling qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. Chapter 11 discusses the **management and coding** of both types, explaining the technology and the options available. Once you have got quantitative data sets onto a computer, programs can be used to prepare tables and frequency distributions. This is illustrated in chapter 12, which uses an example to illustrate the steps you need to go through to do simple **analyses of survey data** using the most widely used computer package, SPSS/PC.

You do not necessarily have to collect survey data yourself to do quantitative research. Government departments, research companies and academic social researchers often deposit their data sets as computer files in national archives, from which copies can be obtained for further analysis. This is 'secondary analysis', which is fast becoming one of the most important forms of social research. It opens up quantitative research to those who do not have the considerable resources needed to carry out a large scale survey. As chapter 13 notes, **secondary analysis** demands some skills not needed for other forms of social research, including being able to devise ways of testing hypotheses against data originally collected for other purposes. The kind of difficulties which this raises and the ways that they can be overcome are illustrated in the next chapter, Exemplar C. This describes a project based on secondary analysis which examined how differences in occupational pension provisions lead to major inequalities among elderly people, particularly according to gender.

The next two chapters illustrate approaches to analysing qualitative data such as interview transcripts and audio and video recordings. Both

chapters focus on the analysis of the **interactional organisation** of these materials. Chapter 14 uses as example an extract from a taped interview with a 'punk', in which the punk provides an account of a violent incident. The analysis shows how the account is organised to indicate the innocence of the punks and the provocative nature of police action. Chapter 15, which draws on the tradition of **conversation analysis**, shows how one can analyse fragments of dialogue recorded on audio or video tape to provide insights into the organisation of social interaction.

Research only becomes effective when it is written down and published for researchers, policy makers and others to use and to criticise. The final chapter of the book is about **writing** about one's research. It examines the format of a typical research article and explains some of the historical background to publication conventions in the social sciences.

The coverage and treatment of topics in this book is based on the course taught in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey for first and second year undergraduates. The contributors are all lecturers and researchers in the Department and have not only had experience in carrying out research in the ways they describe, but also of teaching it, both to undergraduates and to graduate students. The book has been much influenced by feedback from many generations of students, a surprising number of whom have gone on to become social researchers themselves. We hope that you, like our students, will find that the skills of social research can be used both to help in understanding our society better and to support work in many professions and careers.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Contributors	viii
Introduction <i>Nigel Gilbert</i>	xi
1 Social research and sociology <i>Martin O'Brien</i>	1
2 Research, theory and method <i>Nigel Gilbert</i>	18
3 The research process <i>Sara Arber</i>	32
I Beginnings	
4 Gaining access <i>Michael Hornsby-Smith</i>	52
5 Designing samples <i>Sara Arber</i>	68
II Into the field	
6 Questionnaires <i>Rosemarie Newell</i>	94
7 Measuring attitudes <i>Michael Procter</i>	116
8 Qualitative Interviewing <i>Nigel Fielding</i>	135
9 Ethnography <i>Nigel Fielding</i>	154
Exemplar A Becoming a carer <i>Patricia Taraborrelli</i>	172
10 Using documents <i>Keith Macdonald and Colin Tipton</i>	187
Exemplar B Building respectability <i>Keith Macdonald</i>	201

III Back home

- 11 Coding and managing data** 218
Jane Fielding

- 12 Analysing survey data** 239
Michael Procter

- 13 Analysing other researchers' data** 255
Michael Procter

- Exemplar C No jam tomorrow: why women are disadvantaged
in occupational pensions** 270
Jay Ginn

- 14 Analysing accounts** 287
Robin Wooffitt

- 15 Explicating face-to-face interaction** 306
Christian Heath and Paul Luff

IV Endings

- 16 Writing about social research** 328
Nigel Gilbert

- Bibliography** 345

- Index** 357

1 Social research and sociology

Martin O'Brien

Contents

1.1	The discipline of sociology	2
1.2	Sociological understanding	4
1.3	Sociological theory	10
1.3.1	What is 'theory'?	10
1.3.2	Research is 'theory dependent'	11
1.4	Sociological investigation	13
1.5	Conclusions	16
1.6	Further reading	16

This book is about exploration and discovery in the social world, the world that each of us helps to create, the world that we all inhabit. It is the purpose of this book to help you to make your own discoveries, to help you find out why the social world is as it is: why the societies we live in are structured as they are; why there are differences between groups within societies; why not everyone holds the same beliefs and commitments and why people act differently in different circumstances. Each of us makes discoveries of this kind throughout our lives. We find out new things about the social world simply by living in it, by growing up in it and by the experiences we have of it. We are all aware of the different dimensions of our social life to some degree. We experience the different expectations that are placed upon us as children or parents, in churches or in schools, at home or at work. Yet, most of the time, this awareness exists only in fragments: we know how to deal with each situation as it arises but we are rarely aware of how these situations connect together to build up our total social life.

By studying this book, by completing the projects it contains and by following up on the further readings listed at the end of each chapter it is our intention to help you to build up such a picture. Whether you work in academic sociology, in a caring profession, in urban planning or community work or whether you are simply interested in finding out more about our collective social life, the chapters in this book are designed to guide

you towards a more complete assessment of the nature of the society around you.

At the start of this guide you must be aware that researching social life is a process with many components. It requires skills in collecting and analysing data, in developing and applying concepts, in assessing evidence and in presenting coherent and consistent arguments to demonstrate the significance of empirical observations. It is important to develop all of these skills in order to put research to good use. Yet, before one can begin to develop these skills, it is necessary to gain some insight into the discipline from which they derive. The authors of this book are all sociologists, connected with the University of Surrey in England and each of us uses a sociological imagination (cf., Mills, 1959) when we conduct research. Consequently, readers of the book need to know something of the 'mission' that the discipline of sociology represents. This chapter will outline some of the key features of sociology as an approach to understanding social life: this will be done, first, by making some general remarks on sociology, on its assumptions and its language; second, by discussing what is unique about sociology as a way of understanding and interpreting the social world; third, by discussing the role of theory in social research; fourth and finally, by discussing two exemplary pieces of research which show how adopting a sociological imagination makes visible aspects of the social world which were previously obscured from our perception.

1.1 The discipline of sociology

There is an old adage, first coined by the American economist Duesenberry, that economics is the study of the choices that people make while sociology is the study of why people have no choices (cited in Boudon, 1981: 6). In other words economics is the study of freedom whilst sociology is the study of constraint. Now, if things were as easy as this there would be no reason for sociologists to reflect on their own discipline but, fortunately or unfortunately, things are not quite so simple. Because whilst sociology does indeed investigate the constraints that people face – the things that limit our choices and our actions – it also investigates a whole range of other things, including how societies change and develop, how people interact, how professions and prestigious groups develop rituals, how architecture and design influence our behaviour and perception, how human-machine interaction influences working patterns and much, much more. Sociology is, characteristically, a very nosey discipline indeed, with its fingers in very many pies all at once. In consequence of this, it is too limiting to think of sociology as being only one thing. Like any other discipline that is alive and flourishing there are numerous ways that we can characterise sociology.

For example, we can think of sociology as a profession comprising a

hierarchy of paid members who fulfil specialised roles – such as teachers, tutors, researchers and administrators, and so on.

Or we can characterise sociology as a collection of methods for studying empirical questions. These methods, as in other analytical disciplines, range from the observational (watching what happens), through the interactional (asking about what happens), to the mathematical (predicting and modelling what happens).

We can also characterise sociology as an array of theories for assessing the significance of what happens and what its methods bring to light. Again, like any other analytical discipline, sociology is alive with debate and controversy over the meaning and significance of what it uncovers.

We can see sociology as a set of – sometimes discrete, sometimes overlapping – areas of interest: such as the sociology of work, of the family, of the media, of development, and so on.

We can say that sociology is a branch of learning: a particular way of developing skills of reading, writing, analysis and argumentation. The implication of this is not that there is only a single way of reasoning and argumentation in sociology; rather, the discipline is characterised by a variety of logics and assumptions. Yet, these differ from the logics and assumptions of other disciplines – such as economics or psychology, for example. This chapter will address some of these specifically sociological assumptions and logics.

Finally, from the reader's point of view . . . well, perhaps it is best to leave it to you to decide what you think sociology is.

The point is that all these ways of describing sociology are correct: sociology is many things to many people. It fulfils a wide variety of functions and is used for a wide variety of purposes.

On top of this variety in characterising the discipline itself is the fact that sociologists also seem to have their own special language for talking to each other, like a secret code, replete with masonic mental handshakes, that has to be cracked before you can understand any of their messages. Sometimes this secret code appears to follow the rule, 'don't use one syllable when twenty will do'. Sociological language is filled with 'ologies', 'ations' and 'isms': for example, ethnomethodology, rationalisation, interactionism, and the like, some of which, very confusingly, actually refer to very simple things: the study of how real, actual people go about making sense of the world around them; the process of applying logic and means–ends reasoning to social organisation and behaviour; and the study of how people relate to each other in different situations, respectively. Of course, these concepts refer to much more than this in the conduct of sociological enquiry. The point is that it is rarely difficult to gain a basic understanding of sociological terms.

Yet what can sometimes seem worse than even the language problem is that sociology has its own structure of ideas – a sort of scaffolding of concepts, terms and theories that at first sight can look as if they have all been heaped up in a big messy pile with no discernible design. As you read