Understanding
Social Research

Thinking Creatively about Method

Jennifer Mason and Angela Dale

§SAGE

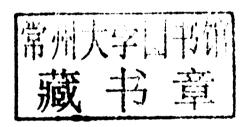# Understanding Social Research

Thinking Creatively About Method

Edited by Jennifer Mason
and Angela Dale

⑤SAGE

MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC
www.fsc.org FSC® C013056

Notes on Contributors

Dimitris Ballas is a senior lecturer in Geographical Information Systems in the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield. He is an economist by training (University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece) and also has a MA (with distinction) in Geographical Information Systems (University of Leeds, UK) and a PhD in Geography (University of Leeds, UK). He is the lead author of the book *Geography Matters: Simulating the Impacts of National Social Policies* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005) and a co-author of the books *Post-Suburban Europe: Planning and Politics at the Margins of Europe's Capital Cities* (Palgrave, 2006) and *Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain, 1968 to 2005* (Policy Press, 2007). He also has several publications in peer-reviewed international academic journals, peer-reviewed edited volumes and has refereed international conference proceedings.

Punita Chowbey is a research fellow in the Centre for Health and Social Care Research at Sheffield Hallam University. With a background in sociology, social policy and development studies, she has been working on applied and academic projects in health and social development in India and in the UK for the last 13 years. Her research interests focus on the intersections between socio-economic disadvantage, gendered and racialized exclusion and ill-health among children and families.

Nick Crossley is a professor and currently head of Sociology at the University of Manchester (UK). He has published on a number of issues in sociology including embodiment, social movements and social networks. His latest book, *Towards a Relational Sociology*, will be published by Routledge in late 2010.

Angela Dale is Professor of Quantitative Social Research at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research (CCSR) at the University of Manchester. She is an Academician of the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences (AcSS) and was awarded an OBE for services to social science in 2006. Recent work has focused on women's employment, with particular respect to ethnic differences and strategies for combining work and family life; change between generations; and the role of qualifications. In 2009 she became director of a new methods hub at the University of Manchester – methods@manchester.

Katherine Davies is a research associate in Realities (part of the National Centre for Research Methods) and the Morgan Centre for the Study of

Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester. She is currently working on a project exploring the positive and negative significance of friendships and other critical associations in personal lives. She is also working on a PhD investigating sibling relationships and the construction of the self in secondary education.

Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield. He is author, or co-author, of 25 books and 400 papers. Since 2006, Danny has been working with many others on remapping inequality worldwide (http://www.worldmapper.org). He is an Academician of the Academy of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences and, in 2008, became Honorary President of the Society of Cartographers. In 2010, he joined the World Health Organization's Scientific Resource Group on Health Equity Analysis and Research. His most recent book, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, was published by Policy Press in April 2010.

Jane Elliott is Director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies. She leads the team responsible for developing the content, design and analysis of the 1958 and the 1970 British Birth Cohort Studies studies. Her main research interests include gender and employment, women's careers, longitudinal research methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative research and narrative.

Stephen Frosh is Pro-Vice-Master and Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of many books and papers on psychosocial studies and on psychoanalysis, including *Hate and the Jewish Science: Anti-Semitism, Nazism and Psychoanalysis* (Palgrave, 1999); *For and Against Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2006); *After Words* (Palgrave, 2002) and *The Politics of Psychoanalysis* (Palgrave, 1999). He is joint author with Peter Emerson of *Critical Narrative Analysis in Psychology* (Palgrave, 2004). His latest book, *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic* is published by Palgrave in 2010.

Simon Guy is Head of the School of Environment and Development, Professor of Architecture and Head of the Manchester Architecture Research Centre at the University of Manchester. His research is aimed at critically understanding the co-evolution of design and development strategies and socio-technical-ecological processes shaping cities.

Kaveri Harriss is a research fellow in Anthropology at Sussex University. Her doctorate at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine examined the material contexts and consequences of chronic illness among Pakistanis in East London, engaging with issues of premature ageing and unemployment. She now works on East Punjabi transnationalism, and co-convenes the Pakistan Workshop and Pakistan Studies Group.

Penny Harvey is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Her regional specialization is in South America and Europe, and she has conducted fieldwork in Peru, Spain and the UK. Her research interests focus on the modern state, and in how ethnographic work can inflect standard accounts of political economy by extending standard approaches to power, value and knowledge.

Andrew Karvonen is a research associate in the Manchester Architecture Research Centre at the University of Manchester. He combines theories and approaches from the design disciplines, urban studies and STS to study the socio-technical aspects of cities with a particular emphasis on the changing configurations of people, infrastructure and nature.

Hannah Knox is Research Associate at the ERSC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) at the University of Manchester. Her work is broadly concerned with the anthropological study of technologies of modernization and progress. Her ethnographic research has spanned the UK and Peru, to look at the ways in which complex social, technical and expert knowledges intersect in projects of planned social change.

Jennifer Mason is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. She directs the Realities Centre, which is part of the UK National Centre for Research Methods, funded by the ESRC. She is also Co-Director of the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life. She is the author of numerous articles, chapters and books on personal life and relationships, and on qualitative and mixed methods. Her books include the bestselling *Qualitative Researching* (Sage, 2002).

James Nazroo is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. His research is focused on issues of inequality, social justice and underlying processes of stratification, with a particular interest in ethnic inequalities and inequalities in later life. He is pragmatic in his choice of research methods, employing methods, and combinations of methods, best suited to answer the research question. He has particular interests in longitudinal research, comparative research and mixing methods.

Anne Rogers is Professor of the Sociology of Health Care in the School of Community Based Medicine University of Manchester. Her main research interests are in the sociology of health care, mental health and more recently social networks, relationships and personal long-term condition management. Working in interdisciplinary research teams she has been interested in combining qualitative methods in trials of innovation in mental and physical health care.

Sarah Salway is Professor of Public Health at Sheffield Hallam University. Most of her work explores the interplay of gendered and ethnic identities with health-care experiences and health outcomes. She is also interested in the ethical, theo-retical and methodological issues arising from the generation and application of research knowledge relating to inequalities in health.

Lisa Saville Young is a Clinical Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. She holds a PhD in Psychology from Birkbeck College, University of London, UK. Her research interests include developing psychosocial research methods and the construction of masculinities in adult fraternal relationships.

Mike Savage, after 15 years as Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester, moved to the University of York in October 2010. His interests are in social stratification, historical sociology, and in cultural analysis. His recent book, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010) explores in more detail the theme he raises in his chapter.

Rachel Thomson is Professor of Social Research at the Open University. Her research interests lie in childhood, youth and maternal studies, and the meth-ods of capturing and understanding dynamic social processes. Recent publica-tions include *Researching Social Change: Qualitative Approaches* (with McLeod, Sage, 2009) and *Unfolding Lives: Youth, Gender and Change* (Policy Press, 2009).

Jeffrey Weeks is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at London South Bank University. He is the author of over 20 books, and over 100 articles, chiefly on the history and social organization of sexuality and intimate life. Key publica-tions include *Coming Out* (Quartet, 1977), *Sex, Politics and Society* (Longman, 1981), *Sexuality and its Discontents* (Routledge, 1985), *Invented Moralities* (Polity, 1995), *Making Sexual History* (Polity, 2000), *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (with Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, Routledge, 2001), *Sexualities and Society* (with Janet Holland and Matthew Waites, Polity, 2003), and a third edition of *Sexuality* (2009). *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*, was published by Routledge in June 2007.

Acknowledgements

Contents

ONE

Creative Tensions in Social Research

Questions of Method

Jennifer Mason and Angela Dale

Introduction

There are many different approaches to social science research, and a sometimes bewildering array of methods and techniques, each apparently with its own set of advantages, disadvantages and rules. Although there are increasing levels of resources available to help researchers learn about all of these, for the researcher wishing to research *something in particular*, it can be difficult to work out the implications of using one method over another, or of combining different methods and approaches. This is partly because some methods or combinations may be better suited to particular research questions than others. We are familiar with the idea that the methods we use influence the *quality* of the knowledge we can generate in response to specific questions, but importantly they also influence its nature and scope – that is, which parts of the phenomena under investigation it throws light upon. So, one challenge is for the researcher to know what kinds of data and knowledge in relation to *specific social phenomena* a method can potentially produce *before* being able to make a good judgement about which methods they should choose.

This is further complicated, though, by a second challenge, which is to understand how a researcher's conceptual or theoretical stance on the empirical social world leads them to choose a particular method and thus to understand the nature or essence of phenomena in a different way from researchers with different orientations. This means, for example, that two researchers may both be interested in researching the concepts of relationships, or place, or social change – the domains we cover in this book – but they might see the very fabric of *what those things are* in completely different ways. Thus not only do our substantive interests shape the methods we might choose to use, but our methods shape the thing that is the substance of our enquiry too. To borrow a

phrase from two of our contributors, methods and substance 'generate implications for each other' (Frosh and Saville Young). This creates a bit of a conundrum for researchers; one that cannot entirely be resolved by reference to texts and resources that focus on method abstracted from substance.

The aim of this book is to help researchers to deal with these kinds of challenges. So instead of writing a textbook covering, in the abstract, the main methodological approaches, we have asked experts who are doing exciting and important social science research to give some insights into the methods they use, and how their methods and substantive foci generate implications for each other. We have picked three broad substantive domains – relationships, places and social change – and asked researchers with very different research orientations to describe their approaches, their logic and the kinds of knowledge their methods can yield. Yet our aim has not been to produce a book that speaks only to these substantive interests, but instead to use them as a focus to help readers to think about the interrelationship between methods and substance in a way that they can then apply more generally to their own research.

We would like the book to be useful to researchers who want to learn about, and be open to, the exciting breadth of research being practised in the social sciences. This means thinking creatively about methods (and substance), and being prepared to take on board other ways of thinking and researching, and possibly to combine methods. Sometimes this means moving outside one's comfort zone. But in order to do that, one needs not only to see the point of doing so, but also to understand the implications in terms of what kinds of knowledge might be produced, and more generally what might be involved in crossing boundaries between approaches.

The chapters that follow inform the reader about different kinds of approach, and they cover a wide range of methods including ethnography, cartography, survey methods, psychosocial methods, biographical methods, historical methods, narrative methods, visual/sensory methods and social network analysis. Each chapter will give the reader a good sense of 'the point' of using a particular method in relation to a grounded set of issues, and the kinds of knowledge that are produced. And by reading all the chapters in each section, the reader will gain a good sense of some of the different ways in which methodological approaches can define or influence phenomena under investigation.

However, to fully grasp the implications of using a particular set of methods, or crossing boundaries between approaches, it is important to discuss some core or cross-cutting issues here in the introduction. This chapter is written primarily as a guide for the reader to key points of tension, difference and, sometimes unexpected connection between approaches. These are often more implicit than explicit. In this chapter we provide a guide to 'what to look out for', or be alert to, in understanding the implications that a particular approach has for the relationship between methods and substance that we have argued is so crucial to social science research. It is a guide that can be

used not only when reading the chapters in this book, but more generally in deciphering social science approaches: when making judgements about which are best suited to one's own purposes and what might be involved in using and combining them. Hence it is structured around issues that all researchers have to think through and make decisions about when choosing and using methods in real life research.

As you read through the chapters therefore, you may find it helpful to keep a critical eye on how the following kinds of questions and issues – about how the social world is envisaged – figure in the arguments of the authors, both implicitly and explicitly. We are not using conventional distinctions and 'labels' that are often applied to perspectives on social science research – such as 'relativist', 'positivist', 'realist', 'interpretivist', 'post-structuralist' and so on – for several reasons. In part we think that they are sometimes so 'broad brush' as to be quite unhelpful in practical terms, for the researcher who is trying to work out how to go about a particular project. Additionally, we are not sure that such labels are always honestly applied or attributed, and often more telling signs of a researcher's ontological or epistemological positions can be picked up in the way they write about their methods or the accounts they give of their research. Perhaps most importantly though, we think that applying labels can be a little stultifying, since it helps to construct the idea that these are discrete and clearly defined world views, or positions, with little fluidity in them. We want the reader of this book to feel a little more liberated than that, and to embrace the possibility of using approaches with which they may not be very familiar.

What kind of social world is envisaged?

Sometimes authors will spell out explicitly the kind of social world they envisage when they describe the phenomena they are investigating, but at other times this is more implicit or taken-for-granted and, in these instances, the language and vocabulary used can be a telling sign of the kind of ontology being drawn upon, as we shall show.

We set out below some different possibilities for envisaging the social world, all of which appear in some shape or form in this book. As we have suggested, however, that these are not meant to depict discrete world views or research strategies. Instead, they are more like 'ontological dimensions'. Many researchers would want to adopt a mobile view that traverses or even transcends these, arguing perhaps that the social world is made up of multiple elements or dimensions, which come more or less into view depending upon our perspectives or the methods we use. The point, however, for the reader of this book, is to be able to spot the connections between the kinds of ontology that are expressed or implied by authors (in this book and elsewhere) and the methods and approaches that have been devised to generate knowledge of them. That will enable you both to judge how good the fit is between these

(ontology and methods) and also to decide on the value of particular approaches for producing knowledge about the kinds of phenomena that you personally are interested in.

A world of stories and interpretations

Stories and narratives figure in a wide range of research approaches as methods of data generation or analysis; many researchers see stories as good ways of eliciting perspectives *on* the social world, or of narrating experiences *of* it. However, here we want to draw attention to approaches where stories have a more fundamental and ontological role – where the social world is itself seen as a 'storied' entity, in the sense that stories, involving some kind of sentient composition – where people 'make' and 'tell' stories, rather than just acting a part in them – are part of its very fabric. This idea can take many different forms, and perspectives that encompass some sense of a world that is storied do not necessarily share other basic premises.

One example comes from Harvey and Knox's chapter on the ethnography of place which uses the example of road construction projects in Peru. Storytelling figures quite centrally in their chapter. Here is an extract:

> Our travels on the roads of Peru taught us a great deal about the specific materiality of roads and, as importantly, about how the layering of materials through which a road appears in the environment as a specific and relatively stable structure also carried with it histories of skills, of trade, of hopes and of struggle. These histories leave their traces in the stories people tell, in the physical make up of a place, and in the daily practices of those we encountered along the way. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, pp. 116–17)

From this perspective we can see that stories (and histories) are more than just tales about the road – they are part of what the road *is*, or what a place is.

Thomson's chapter on researching motherhood provides a different kind of example. She explains that she 'wanted to capture the "zeitgeist" of contemporary motherhood'. A zeitgeist is the spirit of a particular age or period of history. It seems to us to be a concept very closely connected with stories and storytelling, and certainly Thomson's chapter is redolent with these. For example, she explains that the research 'sought to capture the ways in which women might be storying their pregnancies', and she goes on to argue that:

> women draw on publicly available narrative resources in order to 'story' their lives and make them intelligible to others (Butler, 2004; Thomson et al., 2009). New stories emerge in the confluence of developing identities and available resources that facilitate both the story telling and its reception (Plummer, 1995). The transition from private story to the generation of a public problem involves struggle and recognition of subjecthood, and the privilege to narrate oneself (rather than to be narrated by others) reflects wider dimensions of social, cultural and economic status (Adkins, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). (Thomson, Chapter 4, this volume, p. 68)

In this example, then, the aim is to investigate a zeitgeist, that involves and is implicated in processes of storying and storytelling. It is not simply that stories *yield data* about pregnancy and mothering, or about a zeitgeist, but instead that they are fundamentally bound up in what those concepts are.

A third example comes from Weeks' chapter on understanding change in sexual and intimate life. The object of Weeks' investigation is history itself, or more particularly historical narratives of sexuality. He says:

> Historians also tell each other stories, which they easily assume tell the ultimate truth about the way things were, and are. But we need to learn to understand these narratives better, and especially how they structure meanings into a more or less coherent account of what is happening to us. Narratives or stories are examples of the ways in which 'reality' is constituted through sets of beliefs, assumptions and the appropriate selection of evidence. They are powerful because they carry the unconscious assumption that what is being elaborated for the reader is a 'true history'. But I want to argue that the very act of selection can occlude a complex and more contested history. (Weeks, Chapter 12, this volume, p. 185)

Weeks wants to explore the shaping and dominating role of certain historical narratives and the hidden assumptions that can be traced within them, and to connect these with the ways in which people both live sexuality and campaign for transformation. The very essence of the social world he envisages is one where stories and histories are not simply told about the world, but are woven tightly back into the fabric of both everyday existence and societies and cultures.

We have discussed three different examples of how it is possible to have an ontological view of the social world that is storied, and there are more examples in this book as well as, of course, in the wider world of social research (see the chapters by Mason and Davies [Chapter 2], Elliott [Chapter 14], Frosh and Saville Young [Chapter 3]). We think the examples have in common the idea that the sentient composition of a story, at some level, is a core part of the reality that research seeks to investigate. But there are also many differences between them.

Vocabulary that can sometimes be indicative of this kind of perspective includes: stories, narratives, histories, accounts, perspectives, experiences, traces, interpretations.

A world of socio-architectural structures

Another way of envisaging the social world involves perspectives that operate with some sort of 'socio-architectural' view. What we have in mind here are perspectives that see the social landscape in terms of 'structures', 'levels' or 'networks', for example. These are 'architectural' characteristics in the sense that they are seen to have a kind of social solidity, with definable and

potentially identifiable properties, characteristics or effects. For some researchers who use this kind of perspective, the 'architectural' features (or the solidity) are themselves made up of dynamic elements, agency, social relations and interactions that cohere or form constellations in certain 'structural' ways, where for others the emphasis is upon more fixed and infrastructural qualities of the social world. Despite many differences between approaches, what is always present is the desire to say something about the *properties* of these architectural features, for example, a network's density, or the effect of structural or 'family level' factors, or the cohesiveness or permeability of social class structures. Here are some examples from the book.

Crossley argues that the social world:

> is a network and the pattern of connections constituting that network is an important aspect of what we mean by 'social structure' … Different network patterns, involving different types of relations and different populations, constitute the multiple overlapping social structures that comprise a social world. (Crossley, Chapter 5, this volume, p. 75)

Here, networks have identifiable characteristics including density, and social network analysis (SNA) draws on graph theory for its concepts and terminology so that, for example, '"distances" are measured in terms of "degrees", a degree being a connection' (p. 85).

A different version can be found in Dale's chapter, where she refers to work by Jenkins et al:

> The authors use multilevel modelling (where the family is one level in the analysis and the child is a different level) to attempt to establish the relationship between shared family-level effects and differential treatment of children by parents. (Dale, Chapter 6, this volume, p. 100)

The levels in Jenkins et al.'s work, and the networks in Crossley's, are certainly not the same – indeed there are some fundamental differences between them – but we think there is a common sense of socio-architecture behind both of them. Another example can be found in Dorling and Ballas's chapter, in which they describe 'human area population cartograms' (Chapter 10). These are cartograms based on 'the spatial distribution of variables pertaining to human societies', using data drawn from surveys of individuals and households, including the British Household Panel Survey. Such cartograms can be used to map data about *populations* against different geographical 'levels' (for example, national, sub-national). Here populations are conceptualized in terms of their aggregated characteristics at a defined level of geography.

A final example comes from Salway, Harriss and Chowbey's chapter on 'putting long-term illness in context'. They express a socio-architectural view when they explain that they wanted to push beyond a focus on individual narratives of ill health in their project.

> We suggest that the dominant reliance on narrative interviews [in research on chronic ill health] has meant limited attention to the social structural and cultural conditions that articulate with individual responses to chronic illness ... While we recognized the importance of listening to the personal testimonies of individuals living with long-term illness, we also aimed to understand wider contexts and processes that are commonly taken-for-granted and less open to investigation through interviews. (Salway, Harriss and Chowbey, Chapter 9, this volume, pp. 134–5)

Other chapters in this book that contain elements of a socio-architectural view include: Elliott (Chapter 14), Guy and Karvonen (Chapter 8), Nazroo (Chapter 15) and Thomson (Chapter 4).

Vocabulary to look out for: structures, underlying structures, levels, layers, networks, institutions.

A world of individuals or humans

It seems obvious that social scientists would be exploring social worlds that are made up of individuals, and groups of individuals, and certainly this basic idea permeates very many social science perspectives. Indeed, structures and levels are often conceptualized as comprising linked or aggregated individuals or patterns of behaviour. This underlying logic is particularly pronounced in social survey methodology, as the following examples help to illustrate.

Our first example comes from Dale's chapter, where she explains how surveys can build pictures of households by establishing links and connections between the individuals within them. Talking specifically of the British General Household Survey she says:

> Each household has a unique serial number and, within households, each family unit and person is uniquely identified. This provides the basic building blocks for linking information between partners, or between mother and child, or aggregating information about all household members. (Dale, Chapter 6, this volume, p. 95)

Nazroo's chapter discusses the logic of 'panel surveys' (a longitudinal survey in which variables are measured on the same people [units] over time), such as the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), for understanding social change. ELSA collects detailed structured data from approximately 11,000 individuals in consecutive sweeps, and the rhythm of data collection, as well as the coverage of the surveys, is very intensive:

> This intensity reflects the desire to collect a range of data – the causal processes we are typically interested in involve connections between different domains of people's lives (economic, social, psychological, health etc) – and the desire to observe changes as closely as possible to when they occur, so that time order can be established. (Nazroo, Chapter 15, this volume, p. 236)