Before leaping into a project, you need to have an idea about what you are letting yourself in for. Real world research, as discussed and explained at the beginning of Chapter 1, is often an ‘away fixture’ taking place on someone else’s territory. As Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002) put it: ‘In such settings as schools, businesses, clinics, hospitals, welfare agencies, and homes, researchers have far from perfect control, are typically guests and not royalty, have to negotiate and not command, and often must compromise rather than get everything they would like’ (p. xix). False moves can inoculate a firm, school or wherever against future involvements, not only with you, but with other potential researchers – and, possibly, against the whole idea of systematic enquiry as an approach to dealing with problems or understanding situations. Practitioners, such as nurses, teachers or social workers, when getting involved with research, commonly wish to research some aspect of the situation in which they work or are already involved in some way. Here you will have to live with any mess you make.

This is not to argue for things being cut and dried before starting. Any proposals you make for carrying out a project will benefit from discussing your ideas with others including ‘stakeholders’ – i.e. those likely to have an interest in the research either because it might involve them in some additional efforts or trouble, or who might be affected by the findings. Indeed there is much to be said in favour of collaborative ventures, where the ‘client’ and/or others involved have a substantial say in the enterprise.

**Keeping your own project journal**

It is good practice to keep a full and complete record of all the various activities with which you are involved in connection with the project. Some people limit this to the stages when they are collecting data. It is certainly invaluable then as it helps to keep in one place details of appointments and meetings, what data were actually collected, where, when, etc. However, there is much to be said for starting the journal on day one of planning the project. It can take a variety of formats but an obvious one is a large-size diary with at least a
page for each day (they come very cheaply from about March each year!). Keeping it on your computer is attractive, providing you have good computer housekeeping habits.

The kinds of things which might be entered include:

- Notes of things you have read; references (get into good habits of taking full references – see Chapter 3, p. 52 – the effort now will save you pain later when you are trying to chase up missing references). You may find that you get an idea about A when working on B – if you don’t make a note, it may get lost.
- Any thoughts relevant to the project, particularly when you decide to modify earlier intentions; reminders to yourself of things to be done; people to be chased up, etc.
- Appointments made, and kept, together with an aide-mémoire of where you have put anything arising from the meeting (one strategy is to include everything here in the diary).
- Taking stock of where you are in relation to each phase of the project; short interim reports of progress, problems and worries; suggestions for what might be done.

Knight (2002, p. 2) also recommends including reflections on how you, as researcher, are influencing the research findings and on the significance of that influence. Also warnings of things to avoid, such as helping out or giving advice when you are supposed to be simply observing.

The journal can be very valuable when you get to the stage of putting together the findings of the research and writing any reports. In particular, with some styles of research where it is expected that you produce an audit trail (a full record of your activities while carrying out the research) or a reflexive journal (an account reflecting on the process of the research), the research journal is indispensable.
This chapter:

- explains what is meant by focusing on the real world;
- argues that design matters;
- stresses that much real world research is concerned with evaluating something, and that there is often a concern for action or change;
- reveals the authors’ assumptions about what you are looking for in using this book;
- attempts to give something of the flavour of real world research; and
- concludes by arguing for knowing something about methodology (the fundamental principles on which the methods of social research are based) as well as the practicalities of doing a project.

What is real world research?

Real world research, as the term is used in this book, refers to applied research projects which are typically small in scale and modest in scope. Real world research looks to examine personal experience, social life and social systems, as well as related policies and initiatives. It endeavours to understand the lived-in reality of people in society and its consequences. A substantial amount of research of this type is carried out in universities or research institutes by both staff and students, particularly in applied fields such as business and management, criminology, education, and health-related areas such as nursing, social policy, social work and socio-legal studies. There is also applied work in academic social science disciplines including psychology and sociology. It also commonly takes place in local government, businesses, NGOs (non-government organizations) and community organizations, where it is carried out by professionals and practitioners, including practitioner-researchers.

This means that real world research can shape the world as well as explain to us why the world is in the shape that it is. Its focus is different from much academic research where the main
Real World Research

The topics selected are those of current interest to social scientists in universities and other advanced institutions. Research of this type is of high prestige in those circles. Real world research is a mixed bag, with the common theme that the main interest lies elsewhere. This doesn’t mean that there is a strict dichotomy between academic research and applied research with real world concerns. As Alan Baddeley puts it in a paper on applying cognitive psychology ‘... the combination of practical satisfaction and theoretical make the attempt to combine basic and applied research very rewarding’ (Baddeley, 2013, p. 443). Not that this is easy though. Chelimsky (2013) is concerned that in the field of evaluation there is much current practice where theory is largely ignored, while theoretical writing fails to understand the problems of practitioners in the real world.

Much real world research focuses on problems and issues of direct relevance to people’s lives, to help find ways of dealing with the problems or of better understanding the issues. There is no lack of such problems. A fairly random selection highlighted at the time of writing includes crime, austerity and social change, climate change, education, terrorism, gambling, anti-social behaviour, obesity and diet, child care and abuse, and provision for old age, amongst a host of other concerns. The faith is that research, in the sense of principled, careful and systematic enquiry, is one of the best tools available to address these issues.

This book focuses on problems and issues which have a ‘people’ dimension and relevant research methods and approaches. The focus is not overly restrictive as all the problems and issues listed above impinge on humans in some way. Many problems, particularly large-scale, global ones such as climate and environmental change, call for expertise in a range of natural sciences and technologies, but the effects on, and of, the way that people behave are an important part, both of the problems and of their solution. Hence, the book, and the examples used within it, is multi-disciplinary.

As indicated above, the main focus in Real World Research is on relatively small-scale research carried out by individuals or small teams. Again, this is not a major restriction as much real world research concerns problems and issues which are practical, local and grounded in a specific context, and where the need is for answers within a short time-scale. And even global problems have local implications so that sensible projects can be carried out with limited resources. For example, Serrao-Neumann, Di Giulio, Ferreira and Choy (2013) were involved with local-scale projects undertaken in urbanized coastal areas in Brazil and Australia, focusing on improving the dialogue between researchers and decision-makers to improve climate-change adaptation. This research provided suggestions for dealing with the issue studied and made recommendations for change.

In carrying out this type of research, a strong dose of humility is needed. It takes place in highly complex and often volatile situations where conclusions are necessarily tentative. These situations are almost inevitably political (with both a small and a large ‘p’) and there can be many reasons why even eminently sensible proposals arising from the research do not come to pass. For example, educational researchers have faced sustained criticism in the United Kingdom from politicians and others to the extent that the president of the British Educational Research Association claimed that because of a range of perceived shortcomings, ‘educational research might not be missed (even gladly dismissed) by some practitioners and policy makers’ (Mortimore, 2000), although he goes on to assert that, ‘the work is essential if independent questioning and impartial evaluations of policy and practice are to take place’ (p. 5).

The real world notion carries the suggestion of breaking out from the ivory tower and trying to deal with problems affecting people’s lives directly. It can also be viewed as moving from the
research laboratory into places such as schools, hospitals, businesses, shopping malls, street corners or any other setting where people work, play or go about their lives. There is ample evidence that findings from laboratory research are not necessarily replicated in other settings. Levitt and List (2006) discuss differences in the data from laboratory experiments and data generated in natural settings, pointing out that each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and a combination of the two is likely to provide deeper insights than either in isolation. It is similarly dangerous to generalize from studies with university student participants to other groups. Mintz, Redd and Vedlitz (2006) conducted an experiment with a group of military officers and replicated it with a group of students at a public university in the United States. In a scenario dealing with a decision problem in the area of counter-terrorism, the two groups gave widely differing results. However, while most real world research takes place in the ‘field’ (as non-laboratory settings are often referred to by social scientists) and with non-student groups, some researchers with a real world concern for current practical problems choose to work in laboratories and/or with student participants.

The purpose of this book is to give assistance, ideas and confidence to those who, for good and honourable reasons, wish to carry out investigations involving people which have this kind of real world focus; to draw attention to some of the issues and complexities involved; and to generate a degree of informed enthusiasm for a particularly challenging and important area of work.

Design matters

If you don’t give serious attention to the design of a research project you are likely to end up with a mess. Catherine Hakim likens the designers of research projects to architects who are ‘responsible for supervising all subsequent work to implement the design, including that done by quantity surveyors, builders and other specialists who are hired in to help turn the blueprint into a reality’ (Hakim, 2000, p. 1). In small-scale real world research, it is common for researchers to combine the role of designer with responsibility for carrying out the project. This should not preclude seeking specialist assistance in areas such as the development of questionnaires or other data collection instruments, or from statisticians or other experts in data analysis.

Social research, that is research which focuses on people in a social setting, has been carried out in many different ways, the more important of which for carrying out real world studies are covered in later chapters. They fall traditionally into two very broad families, commonly referred to as quantitative research and qualitative research. As the label suggests, quantitative research typically relies on the collection of data in numerical form while in qualitative research data are typically non-numerical, often in the form of words. However, they are shorthand terms for research paradigms, each of which has a collection of typical features over and above the type of data collected. They are discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

In a very similar way, social research designs can be divided into two major types or styles. In one style the design of the study is fixed at an early stage of the research process. You have worked out what you are going to do and how you are going to do it in considerable detail before getting down to collecting data. We refer to them as fixed designs, and discuss them in detail in Chapter 6. The experiment and the survey, two strong traditions in social research, are the prime examples of this style of research. The second broad strategy is more flexible, in the sense
that while there may be a considerable amount of preliminary planning, details of procedure are not fixed in advance and the focus is liable to change as the research proceeds. Here the detailed design evolves as a result of what is found out in the early stages. We refer to them as *flexible designs*, and discuss them in detail in Chapter 7. There are several popular designs of this type including ones taking an ethnographic approach or using grounded theory.

Many texts refer to what are here called fixed designs as quantitative designs, and flexible ones as qualitative designs. This is because fixed designs almost always depend on the collection of quantitative, numerical data and flexible designs typically rely heavily on the collection of *qualitative data*, usually in the form of words. However, there is no bar on flexible designs involving the collection of *quantitative data*. In practice many real world flexible designs involve the use of two or more data collection methods and it is common to collect at least a small amount of quantitative data. Similarly, there is a case for many fixed designs, while concentrating on the collection of quantitative data, also collecting some qualitative data. More generally, there is a growing interest in *multi-strategy designs*, discussed in Chapter 8, where there is substantial collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in different phases or aspects of the same project.

In some circles, particularly amongst those who are advocates of the increasingly widely advocated evidence-based approaches, there is a strong tendency to regard fixed designs as superior to flexible ones. Experiments, particularly those involving randomized controlled trials (RCTs), are viewed by many as the ‘gold standard’ for social research, though this view is by no means universal. This issue is discussed in some detail in Chapter 6, p. 117, where the notion of a universally applicable gold standard in the design of social research is questioned.

The requirement for a detailed design in fixed design research is well established. There are clear rules about what is needed in order to carry out the research to a professional standard. To a large extent this involves following tried and tested steps and procedures. Flexible designs are much more difficult to pin down. This is in part because it has only been relatively recently that researchers have given consideration to the design issues which they raise. There had been a tradition in the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology, from which these approaches largely derive, of an ‘apprenticeship’ model. Skill in their use was developed by working alongside someone already skilled. However, establishing principles for the design of this type of research has excited much interest and generated many publications recently.

At a more general level, quantitative research with its heavy reliance on numerical data and statistical analysis is considered by many of its proponents to be the way to do ‘scientific’ research. The scientific status of qualitative research is more in dispute. Some proponents of this style of research have no wish to have their research viewed as *science*. As discussed in the next chapter, there are strong arguments for characterizing both types of research as scientific – provided that they are carried out in a systematic, principled fashion.

**Evaluation and change**

Much research with a real world focus is essentially some form of *evaluation*. Is the organization of educational provision for children with special needs such as learning difficulties, or problems with sight or hearing, working effectively in a particular local authority area? Does a child abuse service actually serve the interests of the children concerned? Can a business improve its interviewing procedures for new sales staff? Evaluation brings to the fore a very different agenda
of issues from those usually associated with ‘pure’ research. For example, issues to do with change (How can it be implemented? What are the barriers to implementation and how might they be overcome?) often loom large. There are influential approaches within applied social research which regard the support and engineering of change as an integral part of the research process (see Chapter 2, p. 34). However, as Stange and Phillips (2007) warn, in an introduction to a journal issue with a set of studies pointing to the difficulties of introducing change, ‘Real change is real hard in the real world’.

Should you, as a researcher, get involved in these aspects? A possible stance is to say that the researcher’s responsibility stops with achieving some understanding of what is going on, and then handing that information over to those directly concerned. An alternative is to say that it is part of the researcher’s job to use this understanding to suggest ways in which desirable change might take place and perhaps to monitor the effectiveness of these attempts. There are no general solutions to these issues. The answers in each case depend to a considerable extent on the situation in which you find yourself. Certainly someone attempting to carry out research into the situation in which they themselves are working or living may find that the change aspects become virtually impossible to separate out from the research itself.

This mention of what amounts to ‘self-evaluation’ opens up a Pandora’s box. At one extreme, some would doubt the feasibility of insiders taking part in any worthwhile, credible or objective enquiry into a situation in which they are centrally involved. Others advocate approaches such as ‘participatory evaluation’ (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012), ‘participatory action research’ (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013), ‘collaborative ethnography’ (Lassiter, 2005) or ‘involving service users in research’ (Lowes & Hulatt, 2005) and emphasize the benefits of participation, collaboration and involvement. These texts amply demonstrate the feasibility of such approaches, but the problems and stresses of doing this type of research, and the need for specialists in research and methodology have to be recognized. The role that such specialists should take on then becomes an important issue. One thing they need to be able to do is ‘give away’ skills, an important skill in its own right.

All of which carries with it the implication that the real world researcher needs to have knowledge, skills and expertise in areas outside the likely competence of most academic researchers. How change comes about in individuals and groups is itself an immense research area, some knowledge of which is likely to be helpful if you are involved in its implementation. (Hall & Hord, 2014 provide a practical introduction). For the activist researcher, working for social justice, change is a central concern (Lorenzetti, 2013). For all researchers, a very strong sense of audience is needed to guide the style, content and length of any report or other communication arising from the project. If an important objective is concerned with change, then a report which does not communicate to the decision-makers in that situation is a waste of time.

The audience for this book

Having just stressed the need for a sense of audience when writing, we should make clear for whom this book is written.

After several years teaching courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level which try to deliver real world research skills, we both have been increasingly involved in assisting, through supervision and consultancy, individuals or small groups wishing to carry out some
study, often one directly relevant to the setting in which they work. These have included teachers, social workers, health service professionals, NGOs and charities as well as others working directly with particular client groups (e.g. ex-offenders, vulnerable and disadvantaged populations) as well as professional psychologists and social scientists responsible for providing advice and support to others in both private and public sectors. In carrying out these studies, they are usually seeking to meet some perceived, often pressing, need. We have also been made conscious (partly through responses to the previous editions of this book) of the increasing call for practitioners and professionals in diverse fields such as accountancy, architecture and design, business and management, criminology, and development studies, to carry out empirically based projects, for which many feel inadequately prepared. Such groups form important target audiences.

However, a large section of this book’s readership has always been students and academics, which we trust will remain true with the current edition. The book seeks to provide advice to students at all levels and across a range of disciplines. The focus is on the design, carrying out, analysing, interpreting and reporting findings, dissemination and application of real world research. Our aim is to help you get more ‘bang for your buck’ and produce research with an impact, not least by being picked up by policy-makers.

In part, this is an attempt to arm anyone wishing to use social research methods with tools and expertise that they can both use for themselves and ‘give away’ to others to use. We also have the hope, based on experience, that practitioners in the helping and caring professions, and others working with people, can usefully enquire into their own and others’ practice, with a view to understanding, developing and changing it.

**A word to those with a social science background**

It is our strong impression that, for carrying out real world research, the exact social science discipline background of the potential researcher is not all that important. A psychology graduate is likely to have been well steeped in experimental design and to know relatively little about qualitative approaches (although such approaches are now being taken seriously by an increasing proportion of departments). A sociology graduate will be likely to have had the reverse experience. The approach taken in this book is deliberately promiscuous. Strategies and techniques which have tended to be linked to different disciplines have been brought together in an attempt to give researchers a range of options appropriate to the research questions they are asking. Hence it is hoped that those from a range of social science disciplines will find material which is both useful and accessible. This book’s multi-disciplinary approach to methodology in the *social sciences* becomes more relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the expansion of the range of methods and methodological approaches explored by disciplines including criminology, politics and social work. Secondly, the encouragement of *stakeholders*, funding bodies and research councils to engage in cross-disciplinary research.

**A word to those without a social science background**

Our experience is that the approaches advocated here can be accessible to those without a background or training in the social sciences. The things that social researchers do are not all that different from those in a variety of other trades and professions. Northmore (1996) for example,
writing for investigative journalists, reveals many similarities. The research task has been compared with that of the detective: information is gathered; a ‘case’ is made on the basis of evidence; comparisons are made with the modus operandi of suspects; decisions are made about the best explanation, etc. (Scriven, 1976; Smith & Davis, 2012). There are more obvious linkages with the helping professions such as therapists, counsellors, etc. and with humanities disciplines such as history.

A problem is that you ‘know not what it is that you know not’ and may rush in blindly or blithely without realizing the complexity of the situation. Our advice is that you seek to appreciate the implications of carrying out a scientific study. If you are not from a scientific background, or are ‘anti-science’, please try to keep your prejudices in check. The next chapter aims, among other things, to clear away some common misconceptions about the scientific approach. You won’t be expected to wear a white coat, or, necessarily, to crunch numbers.

Associated with the scientific approach is the need for rigour and for rules or principles of procedure. However, as has already been stressed, many real world studies both permit and require a flexibility in design and prosecution which may well appeal to those with a background in the arts or humanities. Well-written flexible research designs based on people’s accounts or other qualitative data can provide a compelling report. A major theme of this book is how to introduce rigour into all aspects of research so that we achieve a justified believability and trustworthiness in what we find and write up.

You will be at a disadvantage compared to those with a social science background in two main ways. First, the carrying out of systematic research calls for a set of skills – for example, in observing and interviewing, designing, analysing, interpreting and reporting. The development of these skills requires practice, which takes time. This can and should have taken place during training in most social science subjects but in the absence of these skills, you will have to learn ‘on the job’ or to sub-contract some or all of the tasks to others who do have the necessary skills.

Second, and more difficult to remedy, the social sciences have a substantive content of philosophical underpinning, theories, models and findings which in general you will not be aware of. It is difficult to assess how much of a disadvantage this puts you under. One obvious solution is to work in partnership, or on some kind of consultancy basis, with a professional social researcher. This practice is becoming more commonplace with numerous NGOs, organizations and individuals linking up with universities and academics to develop, as well as conduct, mutually beneficial research. If you are a practitioner or professional, trained and experienced in the field which is the subject of the research, then you will have a corresponding, and possibly more useful, set of theories, models, etc. to those deriving from the ‘pure’ social science disciplines. This is not to minimize the importance of theory. It simply makes the point that a theoretical or conceptual framework can be acquired by a variety of means (including interaction with, and analysis of, the data you have collected). When, as will often be the case, the intention is to assist individuals, groups or organizations to understand, and possibly develop or change, some aspect of themselves and the situation in which they find themselves, there is virtue in staying close to the concepts and language they use. Certainly, unassimilated jargon often accentuates the commonly acknowledged theory/practice divide.

The basic claim being made here is that principled enquiry can be of help in gaining an understanding of the human situation and its manifestations in an office, factory, school, hospital or wherever, and in initiating sensible change and development via evaluation or small-scale research. It is important not to claim too much, however. Common sense, management fiat, hunches, committee meetings, political considerations and the like are going to continue to form
the main precursors to action. As Gerring (2001) reminds us, ‘The cause of civil rights, for example, was advanced more by visual images – of peaceful protesters being sprayed with water cannons and beaten by police – than by social science’ (p. 254). But getting research on the agenda as something likely to be of assistance if there is an important decision to be made or problem to be dealt with, would be a step forward. And if you can consult an experienced researcher for advice and support, you may well find that your efforts are more effective.

Returning to the real world

The proposal for a real world emphasis is reflected in several dichotomies – suggesting applied research rather than pure or basic research; policy research, not theoretical research. These dichotomies are probably not very helpful as they suggest absolute distinctions. Hakim (2000) sees these differences more in terms of emphasis. For her the main features that distinguish policy research from theoretical research are:

an emphasis on the substantive or practical importance of research results rather than on merely ‘statistically significant’ findings, and second, a multi-disciplinary approach which in turn leads to the eclectic and catholic use of any and all research designs which might prove helpful in answering the questions posed (p. 213).

The emphases and priorities of the real world researcher differ in several ways from those of the traditional academic researcher. Box 1.1 suggests some of the dimensions involved. Not all of the aspects shown in the box will occur in any particular study, but they go some way to characterizing this approach to research. Kelly (2003) illustrates a range of tensions found in the fledgling field of community psychology when trying to meet the aim of carrying out research which is nested in, and relevant to, real life communities and also the expectations of their reference group of scientific psychologists.

Entering into this kind of real world research could, with some justice, be viewed as capitulation to the values of an enterprise culture. There are obvious dangers in being a ‘hired hand’. You may, overtly or covertly, be serving the agendas of those in positions of power (Scheurich, 1997), perhaps being hired to seek sticking-plaster solutions to complex and intractable problems. As Lynd (1939, p. 178), quoted by Gerring (2001, p. 255), warned, ‘when [a social scientist] pulls his scientific punch by pocketing more important problems and accepts a retainer to work as an expert for the partisan aims of a bank or an advertising agency, he is something less than a scientist’.

However, there is the advantage that letting society, in the guise of the client or sponsor, have some role in determining the focus of your research project makes it more likely that findings are both usable and likely to be used. And, as Lynd added, ‘when the social scientist hides behind the aloof “spirit of science and scholarship” for fear of possible contamination, he is likewise something less than a scientist’.

Why do research in the real world?

Real world research is a cornerstone of applied learning, evidence based policy and informed decision-making. It means that important organizational, practice and policy decisions are made from an informed perspective, ultimately leading to evidence based policy and practice, not
practice based policy and evidence. In the current climate of risk management, accountability and restricted funding, real world, applied research becomes more relevant; it’s too expensive to make risky decisions and all decisions need to be potentially ‘future-proofed’. From an academic perspective the importance of real world research in the UK is firmly embedded in funding guidelines from research councils and as part of the national Research Evaluation Framework (REF), which state that research should have an impact on society and not sit in isolation. Socially engaged research that has an impact upon people’s lives is seen, in the social sciences anyway, as a gold standard for which we should all be aiming. However, the notion of socially engaged, accountable and transformative research means that researchers, policy-makers, stakeholders and gatekeepers need to be on the same page in terms of the importance of access and the role value of real world research. This is becoming more commonplace with the realization that quid pro quo agreements need to occur. Organizations should recognize that, by allowing access and giving up some control, they can get invaluable research done at a fraction of the commercial price. Academic institutions should accept that effective, impactful and high ranking research can be done without a huge external grant if they are willing to support staff by investing in research, by giving them access to resources (i.e. internal funds for research, funded PhDs, access to research support services), themselves.

<table>
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<th><strong>Relative emphases of real world and academic researchers</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Real world researcher</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Interest is in solving problems</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Getting large effects (looking for robust results) and concern for actionable factors (where changes are feasible)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Almost always works in the ‘field’ (industry, hospital, business, school, etc.)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Strict time constraints</em></td>
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<td><em>Strict cost constraints</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Often little consistency of topic from one study to the next</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Generalist researchers (need for familiarity with range of methods and approaches)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oriented to client needs (generally, and particularly in reporting)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Currently viewed as dubious by many academic researchers</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Need for well-developed social skills</em></td>
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Issues of access, accessibility and impact will vary with the organizations involved, the research question being asked and the population to be studied. All of which can have a significant impact on the viability of real world research. Getting access to certain organizations’ (e.g. NHS Trusts, or police forces) classified or restricted information (e.g. health databases, as well as populations (e.g. sex offenders) means that some socially sensitive research can often be off the table without extensive negotiations and safeguarding procedures.

One of the biggest areas of debate within applied, real world social science research is how the findings are used, if at all. Often research is conducted for, or with, stakeholders, but because an organization commissions research, paid or otherwise, does not mean that they have to listen to the outcomes, or implement change. Hence, some real world research can vanish into a vacuum, which can be frustrating for researchers. It is important to realize that even though real world research is important and as a researcher you do the best job possible, ultimately the impact of the research is governed by the organization through which you do it. Doing research in the real world means that you have to be prepared for this.

Although there are these difficulties and issues with real world research, as long as there is a clear understanding of research ownership, accountability, independence and the roles of all involved from the outset, a lot of these can be mitigated. Real world research should be central to policy-making, effective practice and the management of societal change.

Website examples

The website gives references to a range of examples of real world studies.

There are similar website examples given in most chapters. Most are from journal articles; others are published reports of various kinds. You are strongly recommended to follow them up whenever the topic interests you. They have all been obtained directly from the Internet. As discussed in Chapter 3, p. 53, you will need access to a university or other academic library to get full-text versions of much of the material, although abstracts are often freely available and there are an increasing number of journals where access to the full text is also free.

Don’t be concerned if you can’t understand the more technical aspects of an article, particularly in these early chapters. You usually only need to get a general idea of what it is about. Don’t be put off by the fact that most articles are multi-authored. Much real world research is a group activity. And it is not unusual for research students and junior researchers (who might have done most of the work) to have their name coupled with those of project directors, thesis supervisors or other senior staff.

Beginning the journey

One of the beauties and enduring strengths of books is that they are ‘random access devices’. It is up to readers what they select or skip. In this book the marked pages, chapter headings and index are all ways of giving rapid and direct access to the more ‘nuts and bolts’ aspects of research, such as the choice and use of different methods of gathering evidence, of analysing different kinds of data, of writing a report appropriate to a particular audience, and so on.
Be warned though, that entering into any kind of investigation involving other people is necessarily a complex and sensitive undertaking. Many social scientists, particularly those teaching academic courses preparing students to carry out social research projects, argue that a thorough grounding in methodology (i.e. in the theoretical and philosophical background to social research) is an essential precursor. Whether the same prior methodological understanding is necessary to carry out real world research is the question at issue here. There are certainly counter-examples: novice researchers without a social science background who have produced competent pieces of research. However, it is a good general principle that it does help to know why you are doing what you are doing – and an important part of the ‘why’ comes from methodology. Hence the following chapter seeks to provide sufficient of this background to place the practical aspects of doing a social research project in a theoretical context.

There is a more specific reason for the inclusion of this material which should be made explicit. Advocating flexible designs as a serious possibility is still likely to be viewed as a radical and risky departure in some disciplines, especially those steeped in the statistical sampling paradigm. Justification is called for. Taking a stance that there are some circumstances where fixed designs are to be preferred, and others where flexible ones are more appropriate (and some where it helps to have both), and claiming that the whole can be regarded as a scientific enterprise is also likely to antagonize those of both scientistic and humanistic persuasion. There are strongly held views that there is an ideological divide between qualitative and quantitative approaches and that this particular twain should never meet. Bryman (1988; 2006b) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) consider that many of these differences are more apparent than real and that there can be advantages in multi-strategy designs which combine qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Hence, before getting down to how you are going to design your research project in Part II of the book, Chapter 2 presents an overview of the methodology of social research.

Further reading

The website gives annotated references to further reading for Chapter 1.