

TURNING
IDEAS
INTO
RESEARCH

THEORY,
DESIGN &
PRACTICE

**BARBARA
FAWCETT**

**ROSALIE
POCKETT**



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston

ONE

Why do research?

In this chapter we look at the many underlying reasons for carrying out research. We explore different ways of researching and start to map out the connections among ideas, conceptual frameworks, the formulation of research questions and methodology. We also develop and take forward our key themes relating to the importance of world-views or ontological and epistemological frames, inclusivity and participation and how research can inform policy and practice.

Research and researching often acquire a certain mystery. Research activity can be viewed as requiring particular training, elevated skills or a proven academic track record. However, we want to start out by looking at research in its broadest sense in order to both simplify and emphasize 'doability'. We all can be seen to employ research skills in our daily lives as part of exploring an area where we need to gain more information, to check out something we are presented with or to question a statement or a position that has been adopted. Research is about wanting to know more, about working out how to do this and about exploring how action can follow from investigation. This is not to appear to dismiss research knowledge or training. It would be pointless to keep reinventing the wheel, but it is important to emphasize that we all, in various ways, engage in research as part of our daily lives and that we are all eminently capable of undertaking a variety of research projects.

Devising and carrying out a research project is often a question of confidence. If we believe we can do something then invariably we do it. If we doubt ourselves then it is all too easy to place research in the 'too hard' basket. There has also been an apparently impermeable barrier erected between researchers and students, between researchers and practitioners, and between researchers and consumers. If we do not feel able to carry out research generally or to look at those areas that we know about and have an interest in then we lose a significant dimension and leave room for others to constitute 'evidence' for us.

DEVELOPING RESEARCH IDEAS FROM PRACTICE

Context features significantly in relation to the undertaking of research. Politics, at national and local levels, exerts influence in terms of funding priorities, budgetary constraints, areas that are being targeted for investigation as well as a host of other aspects operating at a range of levels. Wherever a researcher or student is placed within an organization, the networking and resource opportunities available will feature significantly, as will the commitment of the university or organization. All of these factors can serve to govern the orientation of a research project, but whether there is a strong element of direction or whether there is more flexibility, research questions flow from the generation of good ideas.

In turn, good ideas flow from moments of inspiration, from detailed work in specific areas, from big-picture scenarios and from making links and connections.

It is also important to note that context incorporates current knowledge location in terms of contemporaneous influencing factors. Students, for example, will draw from previous experience, academic input and their discipline or interdisciplinary base to generate ideas for research. Those operating in fields of practice will have ideas associated with areas that are proving problematic or those which are working well. Coming up with a good idea initiates the research process and triggers commitment, enthusiasm and determination. A good idea may need considerable refinement to translate into a viable research question, as we see in Chapter 4, but without a good idea a research project will not get off the ground.

INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN PRACTICE

Research can be undertaken as an individual activity and for many students resources and regulations can make inclusive and collaborative projects difficult. However, inclusion can now be seen to be featuring significantly in the arena of social research. Indeed, in terms of research making a difference to policy and practice, it makes sense to involve those in the change area, be they professionals, those who use services or, as is increasingly being acknowledged, those who wear multiple hats, in the process. Ensuring that 'end users' are included and participate in research is increasingly being recognized as a means of building capacity, and although, clearly, not everyone can be involved to the same extent, incorporating inclusivity as a matter of course into the design of a research project is now being taken on board by research funders as well as by those carrying out research projects.

However, it also has to be recognized that 'inclusivity' can be variously interpreted and it is not just a question of inviting everybody along; a great deal of thought has to go into making inclusion and participation work. This is an area we refer to throughout this book and specifically focus on in Chapter 2, where we look

at partnerships in research, Chapter 4, where we explore turning ideas into viable research projects, and Chapter 7, where we consider forms of evaluative researching.

IDEAS AND THEORY BUILDING

In order to make sense of what is around us, we all develop theories. It is about posing 'why' questions, such as 'why is that person being responded to in that way?' or 'why are older people portrayed as "vulnerable"?' . Sometimes, what have been termed 'overarching' theories or 'grand' theories inform how we interpret and make sense of what is around us. Marxism and psychoanalysis are two examples of very different 'grand' theories which can serve to shape understandings and interpretation. In a similar way, modernism and postmodernism influence ideas, theory building and forms of analysis. Modernism, for example, can generally be regarded as encapsulating Enlightenment thinking associated with the supremacy of logic and reason over emotion and a belief in the march of progress. Postmodernism, in its embrace of uncertainty, relativity and fluidity, rejected the key tenets and securities of modernism, preferring instead to focus on contradiction, paradox and flux (Fawcett, 2000). We make meaning by theory building, be it by subscribing to or taking on board 'grand' theories or by posing our own theories to explain what we see around us. Ideas are about theories and ideas and theory building go together.

As part of this discussion, it is important to point out that scientific method and positivist traditions insisted that, in research terms, theories needed to be tested and proved or disproved by the application of prescribed methodologies. However, postmodernist influences have opened up the whole arena of theory building. This is not to say that in research terms 'anything goes' – throughout this book we point to the need for rigour in carrying out all research projects. However, we also want to highlight that ideas no longer need to be tied to particular positions, ways of operating or methodological frames. Researchers need to be clear about what has informed their idea or set of ideas and the theory building that has accompanied this and to present their case, but we want to emphasize that flexibility and creativity and innovation can be embedded in this process.

CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

As we have highlighted, all research has to have a clear purpose and all research involves politics at all levels. Although research can be undertaken in order to extend theoretical frontiers and to address gaps in knowledge frames, much research in the social field is orientated towards bringing about change. As Fawcett et al. (2010) point out, although the relationship between research findings, the production of 'evidence' and social change is labyrinthine, research has a vital role to play. It is also important to acknowledge that it is often the production of

quantitatively obtained findings relating to, for example, unemployment, poverty rates, homelessness, and incidences of violence and abuse, that serves as a trigger for action, further research and change. As Fawcett et al. (2011) emphasize with regard to domestic violence, research focusing on prevalence has served to more accurately represent the extent of it and also to politicize the need for further research and action in this critical area. Similarly, the recent work of Marmot and the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008) has thrown a different light on the factors associated with health and well-being globally and locally. Drawing clear links between health and the social circumstances in which people live, the health of individuals, groups and communities is no longer the mere absence of disease. Epidemiological studies drawing on quantitative methodology are now appraised through the lens of health equality and equity with a focus on the distribution of health resources. These debates have drawn attention to relationships of power and influence concerning the allocation of, access to, and availability of resources that need to be present to ensure that in its broadest sense, good health is within reach of all individuals, enabling them to lead a flourishing life (Bywaters et al., 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

Clearly, quantitative research projects involve the formulation of particular categories as well as the ascription of people to these categories. On the one hand, this can imply a degree of homogenization that does not exist; on the other hand, it brings to the fore findings that have the potential to change social policies and the practices of professionals who operate in the social arena. Overall, the utility of quantitative research processes in highlighting what is going on and in initiating transformation is of considerable importance, and we explore these areas in detail in Chapter 6.

This leads us to an initial consideration of the ways in which a mix of qualitative and quantitative orientations can effectively work together. Quantitative methodologies can produce data that draw attention to trends, patterns and frequency rates. Qualitative researching can utilize and drill down into quantitative data sets and, by means of an arterial span of analytical techniques from content analysis to discourse analysis, can explore insights, meanings and interpretations. This mix is both vibrant and productive, and we go on to examine a range of qualitative orientations in Chapter 6.

RIGOUR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Many new researchers want to carry out research into an area that they know something about or have a passion for. However, issues of bias and objectivity have tended to cause confusion for many, and in some cases have deterred practitioner researchers in particular from carrying out research projects. This confusion arises from the different ways in which qualitative and quantitative research projects are both conducted and evaluated. We discuss this further in Chapters 5,

6 and 8. However, debates about bias and objectivity have tended to come about as a result of the application of scientifically orientated positivist concepts to the social arena. This emanated from the belief that principles drawn from the natural sciences could be applied to the social world in order to uncover fundamental and enduring patterns and connections. Efforts to give social science the status of natural science initially forged this connection. This was underpinned by an emphasis on detachment, logic and the scientific formulation and testing of hypotheses. However, the view that there is an essential reality out there that can be uncovered by means of reliable and valid research methods that are applied objectively with mathematical and statistical precision has waned, and the influence of ontological and epistemological perspectives in quantitative as well as in qualitative forms of researching is generally recognized. Clearly, there are parameters to measure and assess the reliability, validity and generalizability of quantitative research and the trustworthiness and rigour of qualitative research. 'Scientific' notions of bias and objectivity associated with the more traditionally orientated positivistic traditions can be seen to have a number of limitations which have led to the association between quantitative orientations and positivism becoming much more flexible. This has opened the door to a greater number of research opportunities in relation to the generation of ideas and the formulation of viable research projects. This is an area we refer to throughout the book.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Researching is a dynamic activity that enables researchers to manage complex networks, to move between different levels, to interrogate material analytically and to respond to dimensions of power. Researching also necessitates engagement with social, cultural, political and ethical agendas and facilitates the making of links and connections. Overall, in this chapter we have sought to draw attention to the breadth of researching possibilities. To return to the question of 'why do research?' we want to emphasize how research can make a difference, not only in relation to findings and outcomes, but also with regard to process. Researchers want to explore, investigate and analyse areas that they have a strong interest in and where they believe there are new developments to be made, new insights to be had, or where what is currently going on clearly warrants further exploration. Although, as highlighted, utilizing research findings is not as straightforward as is often assumed, research can make a difference in complex contexts by taking account of policy and practice frameworks and by ensuring that research has policy and practice relevance. We argue that illuminating the interplay between policy and practice serves to bring the detail and processes to light and enhances the eventual research impact.

