

6

Collecting data

Introduction • Access and ethical issues • Sampling and selection • Applying techniques for collecting data • Documents • Interviews • Observations • Questionnaires • Recording your progress • The ups and downs of data collection • Summary • Exercises • Further reading

Introduction

All research involves the collection and analysis of data, whether through reading, observation, measurement, asking questions, or a combination of these or other strategies. The data collected during and for research may, however, vary considerably in their characteristics. For example:

- data may be numerical, or may consist of words, or may be a combination of the two;
- data may be neither numbers nor words, but consist of, for example, pictures or artefacts;
- data may be 'original', in the sense that you have collected information never before collected; or may be 'secondary', already put together by somebody else, but re-used, probably in a different way, by you;
- data may consist of responses to a questionnaire or interview transcriptions, notes or other records of observations or experiments, documents and materials, or all of these things.

The purpose of this chapter is to acquaint you with, and guide you through, the processes involved in data collection. The chapter is organized around the following themes and issues:

- **Access and ethical issues:** gaining the cooperation and consent of your

research subjects or institutions, and dealing with the illegal, unethical and unprofessional.

- **Sampling and selection:** choosing the subjects of your research.
- **Applying techniques for collecting data:** the different methods which you may use for your research.
- **Documents:** using written materials as a basis for your research.
- **Interviews:** questioning or discussing issues with your sample.
- **Observations:** collecting data through watching or engaging in activities.
- **Questionnaires:** gathering information through written questions.
- **Recording your progress:** keeping a close check on your data collection.
- **The ups and downs of data collection:** enjoyment, loneliness and obsession.

Access and ethical issues

Two key issues are likely to confront you as a researcher as soon as you begin to consider collecting data for your project: access and ethics. These issues are also likely to be, and perhaps should be, a continuing concern throughout the process of data collection, and possibly also afterwards. They have to do with what data you are able to collect, how you get it and how you use it.

Access

Initially access issues focused upon the generic research need to locate and identify suitable participants who would be willing to partake in social research. A second more personal though not entirely unique access issue emerged whilst undertaking the fieldwork, in that as a wheelchair user I was constantly plagued by an often hostile, inaccessible physical environment.

(Andrews 2005: 204–5)

You should already have given some consideration to the issues raised by access in choosing and focusing your research topic.

See the section on **Choosing a topic** in Chapter 2.

Your research topic may necessitate your gaining, and maintaining, access to any or all of the following:

- documents, held in libraries or by institutions;

- people, in their homes, places of work, in the wider community, or over the Internet;
- institutions, such as private companies, schools or government departments.

The kinds of questions you should consider before seeking such access are the subject of Exercise 6.1, at the end of this chapter.

As part of the process of planning and managing your project, you may already have approached the key individuals or gatekeepers involved in enabling you to access the documents, people and/or institutions you need for your research. The progress of your project, in the way you envisage it, and your ability to collect the kind of data which you want, may be critically dependent on their cooperation. If they say 'yes', you are in and underway (but read on, for it is not usually as simple as that!); but if they say 'no', you may have to look elsewhere or revise your plans. In particular, for research in some settings, such as health and social work, it is essential to get signed formal consent from all the people who will be involved in the research.

How, then, can you increase your chances of getting access? Box 6.1 contains some suggestions.

If you adopt a reasoned, planned and modest strategy, you are more likely to

Box 6.1 How to increase your chances of gaining access

- Begin by asking for advice on how it would be most appropriate to negotiate access.
- Be modest in your requests: limit their scope to what you can handle, and don't start by asking for everything.
- Make effective use of your existing contacts, and those of your supervisor, manager and colleagues.
- Base your research (and perhaps register yourself as a student) within the institutions to which you need access: for example, if they have specialist library facilities, staff with particular expertise, or if they are institutions you wish to study.
- Offer something back to your research subjects: perhaps a report or a workshop. Ask their advice on what might be useful to them. If your research is of potential interest and use to them, they will be more likely to allow you access.
- Ask at the right time. Some institutions need to plan ahead, while others like to act immediately. Busy periods and holidays are not good times.
- Be as clear as possible about what you are asking for: which documents and people, and how long it will all take.
- Explain the reasons for doing your research, why it will be of value, and what the outcomes might be (don't claim too much!)

get the access you need. If, however, despite all of your skills of negotiation, you are rebuffed, you may need to consider other strategies. Some of these are outlined in Box 6.2.

Relatively few researchers end up studying precisely what they set out to study originally. In many cases, of course, this is because their ideas and interpretations change during the research, but the unpredictability of access negotiations is also a major influence.

Gaining access to the people, institutions or documents you wish to study for your research is not just a one-off exercise, which you conduct immediately before beginning your data collection. Rather, it is a continuous and potentially very demanding process:

As the fieldwork progressed, further dynamics of power emerged, particularly in relation to the negotiation and renegotiation of access. Gatekeepers at various levels within the organizations influenced whom we contacted, the distribution of our survey and the nature of interview settings. This affected how we pursued the research process and the nature of

Box 6.2 Strategies to consider if access is refused

- Approaching other individuals. For example, if one person refuses to be interviewed or to answer your questionnaire, you might approach another person in a similar position or with similar characteristics.
- Approaching other institutions. If the institution you had chosen for a case study, or as part of your sample, or because of its library facilities, is uncooperative, you may be able to get access to another institution of a similar kind.
- Approaching another individual within the same institution. This is a more risky strategy, because of their possible communication, but there is usually more than one person who can grant you access, even if this is more limited.
- Try again later, when it may be less busy, attitudes may have changed, people may have moved on, and you may have more to show to demonstrate the value of your research. This is also a risky strategy, since it involves you in going further down a chosen path which may still turn out to be blocked.
- Change your research strategy. This is something you should probably be prepared to do, and plan for, throughout the research process. It may involve using other, perhaps less sensitive, methods for collecting data, or focusing on a slightly different set of issues, or studying alternative groups or organizations.
- Focusing your analysis and writing up on the process of undertaking research, why you were unable to gain the access you wanted, and the possible implications of this for your topic.

the data we gathered, yet also provided insights into the structures in large organizations, degrees of departmental autonomy and lines of communication which became a part of our findings . . . gatekeepers at different levels of the organization had access to different sources of power and influence.

(Munro et al. 2004: 290)

Just because your initial contact within an organization has given the go ahead to your research plans, this does not mean that the data collection process will be smooth and trouble free. This will be the case even if your contact is in charge of the organization you are studying, and even if you are working within the organization yourself. Every time you meet another individual, or meet the same people again, within that organization, you will need to engage, whether explicitly or implicitly, in a re-negotiation of access.

See also the section on **Researching in your workplace** in Chapter 2 for a discussion of the pros and cons of 'insider' research.

Simply because one person has said 'yes' does not mean that their colleagues cannot say 'no'. Indeed, in some circumstances, of which you may initially be blissfully unaware, it may increase the chances of them doing so. You may be unable to call upon your initial contact for help in these conditions: doing so may even exacerbate the problem. Similarly, while an individual may have happily undergone one interview, filled in one questionnaire, or responded helpfully and promptly to your requests for documentation, this does not mean that they will react as favourably to subsequent or repeated requests.

Ultimately, therefore, research comes down to focusing on what is practically accessible. Research is the art of the feasible.

Ethics

In Britain and most of Europe, unlike in the US, social scientists are rarely required to obtain ethical review of their research unless it is to be conducted in conjunction with health practitioners, or within a health setting. Psychological research is commonly required to seek ethical approval from institutionally based review boards but social and health research are currently subject to divergent regulatory structures. This divergence can be related to the different institutional and professional perceptions of the risks attached to health and to social research, and to the differing traditions within these areas of knowledge production.

(Kent et al. 2002)

While electronic communication is in transit . . . the researcher has no control over it. The networks it will pass through are owned by other people who may employ unscrupulous system administrators to maintain them. These administrators have the power to access anything they want. When service provider Prodigy faced protests for raising its charges, it intercepted, read and destroyed messages from dissenting clients and dismissed some members. The latter had no legal recourse and no way to picket the provider. If online discussion relates to criminal activity, law organizations may 'tap' the line and researchers might lay themselves open to being subpoenaed to disclose participants' identities . . . Apart from 'listening in', other users can copy and distribute messages to unintended recipients without the knowledge of the writers. The content of messages can also be changed with great ease . . . although researchers can promise confidentiality in the way that they use the data, they cannot promise that electronic communication will not be accessed and used by others.

(Mann and Stewart 2000: 42–3)

The conduct of ethically informed social research should be a goal of all social researchers. Most commonly, ethical issues are thought to arise predominantly with research designs that use qualitative methods of data collection. This is because of the closer relationships between the researcher and researched. Nevertheless, all social research (whether using surveys, documents, interviews or computer-mediated communication) gives rise to a range of ethical issues around privacy, informed consent, anonymity, secrecy, being truthful and the desirability of the research. It is important, therefore, that you are aware of these issues and how you might respond to them. You owe a duty to yourself as a researcher, as well as to other researchers and to the subjects of and audiences for your research, to exercise responsibility in the processes of data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Box 6.3 outlines a range of ethical problems encountered in social research, which you might like to consider how you would respond to. You might think that some of these problems are rather extreme, and of the sort which are unlikely to be encountered in most research projects, but these are all real dilemmas which were faced and dealt with by real researchers. These researchers include the authors of this book, and some of the students they have supervised, as well as some examples of dilemmas reported in the research literature. Box 6.4 summarizes some of the more common ethical issues you may have to face in your research project under the headings of confidentiality, anonymity, legality, professionalism and participation.

Research ethics are about being clear about the nature of the agreement you have entered into with your research subjects or contacts. This is why contracts can be a useful device. Ethical research involves getting the informed consent of those you are going to interview, question, observe or take materials

Box 6.3 Dealing with ethical problems

Consider how you would deal with the following situations:

- 1 You are researching the parenting behaviours of the parents of hospitalized children. You believe that when they are left alone some parents harm their children. You have a video camera. Do you set it up and use it?
- 2 You have been granted access to an archive of rare documents of crucial importance to your research. It would save you a lot of time if you could take some of the documents home, and security is very lax. Do you 'borrow' some of the documents?
- 3 You are part of a team researching issues of sexuality and you are using email to conduct interviews. You realize that the male members of your team have greater access to men and that the female members have greater access to women. To help with validity your team decides that female researchers should interview male respondents and vice versa. You log on, but your new respondents decline to discuss issues with a member of the opposite sex. You are worried that this will endanger the research project. Do you try again, but this time change your name and pretend that you are the same sex as the respondents?
- 4 Your research has highlighted unethical practices in your organization concerning the abuse of expenses claims. Do you publish it?
- 5 You find a newsgroup on the Internet that is discussing issues central to your research. Do you 'lurk' (listen in without participating) and make use of the data?
- 6 You have been offered £1,000,000 to conduct research into GM foods. The funder is a multinational chemical company with interests in GM crops. Do you accept the funding?
- 7 You have been offered £100 to conduct research into GM foods. The funder is a local direct action group opposed to the development of GM crops. Do you accept the funding?
- 8 You find a document on the Internet that has done much of the background work for your topic. The deadline for the completion of your project has passed. Do you include the relevant detail in your dissertation but omit the reference?
- 9 Your research involves interviewing children under 5 years old. How do you ensure that they are able to give 'informed consent'?

from. It involves reaching agreements about the uses of this data, and how its analysis will be reported and disseminated. And it is about keeping to such agreements when they have been reached.

Box 6.4 Common ethical issues

Confidentiality. It can be extremely tempting, in cases where confidentiality has been agreed or demanded, to use material collected in this way. You may think it is unimportant, or will never be detected, but its use could threaten your sources and undermine your whole research project.

Anonymity. This is often linked to the issue of confidentiality. Where you have assured individuals or organizations that they will not be identifiable in your report or thesis, careful consideration may need to be given to how you disguise them. For example, to refer to a university in a 'northern town of 150,000' rather gives the identity away. If you are quoting from interviews with people in a named organization, disguising people's identities as 'woman, 30s, manager' may also be inadequate.

Legality. If you are a police officer, it is your duty to report any illegal activities of which you become aware in the course of your research. The same applies, though to a lesser extent, to certain other categories of employees, such as social workers or fire officers. More generally, it could also be seen as an obligation shared by all citizens. In some circumstances, where the infringement is minor or occurred long ago, you may be happy to overlook it, but this may not always be the case.

Professionalism. If you are a member of a professional group, as many researchers are, this imposes or assumes certain standards of conduct in your professional life. These may overlap into your research work, particularly if you are conducting research among fellow professionals. You may need to think, therefore, about what you do if you discover what you believe to be unprofessional conduct during the course of your research.

Participation. Are the people you are doing the research *about* the same people you are doing the research *for* and *with*? The issue of involvement of different stakeholders will be of particular importance for some kinds of research, such as research in mental health or disability.

The use of research contracts is discussed in the section on **Dealing with key figures and institutions** in Chapter 5.

All of the problems and examples which we have quoted concern conflicts of interest. These may be between the demands of confidentiality or anonymity, and those of legality or professionalism. Or, more generally, they may be between your desire, as a researcher, to collect as much good data as you can,

and the wishes or demands of your subjects to restrict your collection or use of data. The research process is in part about negotiating a viable route between these interests. The 'pursuit of truth', and the 'public's right to know' are not held as absolute values by everyone.

This point is evident in ethical concerns that are arising from the increased use of the Internet and associated communication technologies. For example, there can be no certainty about the confidentiality of materials sent by email, as they can be easily forwarded and copied. It is not unusual to hear about cases of 'hackers' who gain access to the customer databases of public or private organizations. Particular kinds of ethical issues also arise when computer-mediated communication is used as a data collection instrument. The lack of non-verbal and social cues makes it more difficult for the researcher to monitor how interviewees are responding to questions about sensitive issues. When computer-mediated communication is used for group activities and research, ethical questions are raised about how, when and if those who remain silent (often referred to as 'lurkers') should be 'made' to take part, and what effects 'lurking' has on those who are more open and actively involved.

Many professional associations and employers working in the social sciences have drawn up their own ethical guidelines or codes of conduct for researchers. You should try and get hold of a copy of those that are relevant to your subject area. Giving consideration to ethical issues is also a requirement for those seeking funding, whether as students or academic researchers, from funding bodies. For example, in the UK the Economic and Social Research Council asks proposers to detail the ethical implications of their project. In addition, it may be a requirement (e.g. in health care or social work) that you submit your proposal to an Ethics Committee, and this is becoming more common generally for students researching in universities and colleges. The function of the committee is to consider whether your proposed research conforms to ethical guidelines set out by the relevant professional body, institution or employer, and that it does not infringe applicable laws.

Ethical issues do not solely relate to protecting the rights and privacy of individuals and avoiding harm. They can also relate to the methodological principles underpinning the research design. For example, those with social justice concerns will include the very topic of the research as part of their ethical framework, by asking whether it raises socially responsible questions or has the potential to create a more just world. Box 6.5 gives two examples of such research, and indicates how there is no easy resolution of the dilemmas that are raised. It also shows that ethical issues arise at all points in the research process, including analysis and interpretation. As such, the researcher's values, position and notions of truth are integral to ethical concerns. Researchers need to recognize the complexity and the many facets of ethical issues.

The discussion in this sub-section suggests three general conclusions about research ethics:

- that a consideration of possible or actual ethical issues is an essential part of any research project;
- that such a consideration is likely to need to take place throughout the research project, from initial planning through data collection to writing up and dissemination;
- that in many cases there will be no easy answers to the ethical questions which you may have to face.

Box 6.5 Ethical dilemmas for social justice research

Ethics have methodological implications in research on/for/with human beings, especially where that research is explicitly intended to improve social justice. An example is the use of control groups. These are, methodologically, extremely useful if repetition is not possible. Thus, they are widely used in botanical experiments, in order to test the influence of a single factor on a population (of flowers, say, or beans). Agency and interpretation can be taken into account by the use of 'double blind' tests, where neither the experimenter nor the subject know which is the control group or treatment. For instance, much medical research depends on the double blind use of placebo treatments. The ethical problem for education (as for medicine, but not for botany) is that the method depends on putting some subjects into a 'control' group and deliberately giving treatment thought to be inferior so that better treatments can be tested . . . For anyone wanting to do educational research for social justice, resolutions to these ethical issues of deception depend on judgements about 'on/for/with'.

(Griffiths 1998: 39–40)

. . . of all these [methodological] difficulties, the ethical issues associated with researching in prison have been the most problematic and ever-present . . . at the most basic level . . . none of the young offender institutions has been identified, so as to protect the young men who volunteered to take part in this study . . . All the young men were guaranteed anonymity and so this has also meant that some aspects of the situations that they describe have also had to be changed and are often described in general, rather than specifically. Similarly, while it would have been helpful to reveal how each of these YO institutions was described by, for example, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Howard League for Penal Reform, which formed the basis for how the fieldwork was triangulated, this has again not been possible, for to do so would reveal the identities of the young offender institutions and thus potentially also the young men themselves.

(Wilson 2004: 318)

Sampling and selection

While most people would associate the words ‘sampling’ and ‘selection’ with survey approaches, there will be elements of these involved whatever approach you are taking to your research project. If your research involves observation, you will not be able to observe everybody of interest all of the time. If you are carrying out a case study, you will need to select the case or cases which you are going to focus on. Whatever your approach, you should, therefore, give some consideration to the related issues of sampling and selection.

This may seem unnecessary if your research topic and strategy has been largely determined for you, or if you have a particular case study or action research project in mind. In such circumstances, however, you may still need to justify your choice and relate it to other examples. If you have not yet determined the subjects or objects of your research project, however, you should certainly think about how you are going to choose them and whether they will want to take part.

There are a wide variety of sampling strategies available for use. The main options are summarized in Box 6.6, and illustrated diagrammatically in Box

Box 6.6 Sampling strategies

Probability sampling:

- Simple random sampling – selection at random
- Systematic sampling – selecting every n th case
- Stratified sampling – sampling within groups of the population
- Cluster sampling – surveying whole clusters of the population sampled at random
- Stage sampling – sampling clusters sampled at random

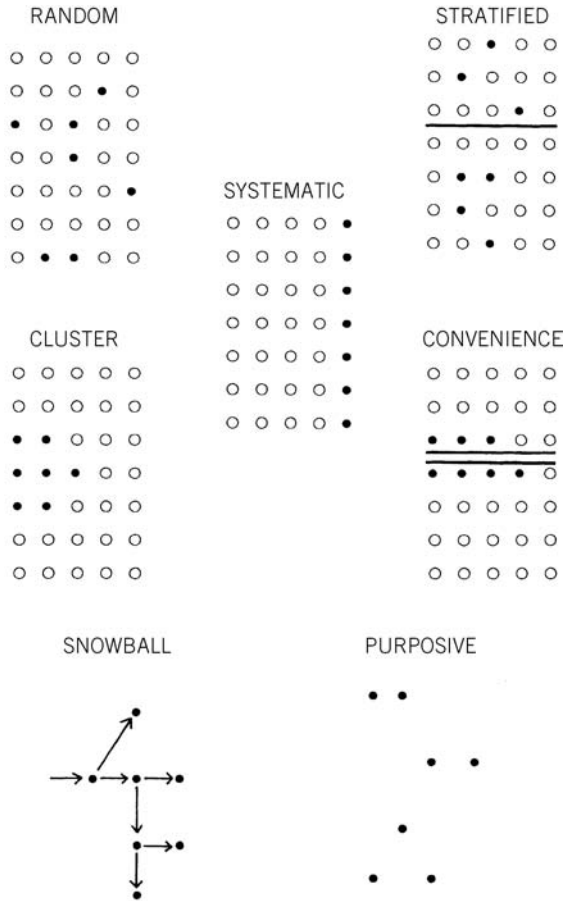
Non-probability sampling:

- Convenience sampling – sampling those most convenient
- Voluntary sampling – the sample is self-selected
- Quota sampling – convenience sampling within groups of the population
- Purposive sampling – handpicking supposedly typical or interesting cases
- Dimensional sampling – multi-dimensional quota sampling
- Snowball sampling – building up a sample through informants

Other kinds of sampling:

- Event sampling – using routine or special events as the basis for sampling
- Time sampling – recognizing that different parts of the day, week or year may be significant

Box 6.7 Sampling strategies illustrated



6.7. They are divided into two main groups, *probability* and *non-probability sampling*.

The most widely understood probability sampling approach is probably random sampling, where every individual or object in the group or 'population' of interest (e.g. MPs, dog owners, course members, pages, archival texts) has an equal chance of being chosen for study. For some readers, this may accord with their understanding of what sampling is. But both more complex approaches, such as systematic and stratified sampling, and more focused approaches, such as cluster and stage sampling, are possible within a probabilistic framework.

Which approach is used will depend in part on your knowledge of the population in question, and the resources at your disposal. Thus, a small-scale researcher wishing to survey public attitudes may not be in a position to sample from the whole country, but will instead restrict their sampling to a local cluster. Or, if you do not know enough about the characteristics of a population to conduct stratified sampling, you might choose to sample from a list of subjects by taking every twentieth person.

Non-probability sampling approaches are used when the researcher lacks a sampling frame for the population in question, or where a probabilistic approach is not judged to be necessary. For example, if you are carrying out a series of in-depth interviews with adults about their working experiences, you may be content to restrict yourself to suitable friends or colleagues. Or you may be studying an issue which is relatively sensitive, such as sexual orientation in the armed forces, and have to build up a sample confidentially and through known and trusted contacts. Market researchers commonly use a quota sampling approach, with targets for the numbers they have to interview with different socio-demographic characteristics.

Box 6.8 (p. 166) summarizes some real examples of the sampling strategies that were adopted for actual research projects. Exercise 6.2 asks you to consider which sampling approach you plan to adopt, and to justify your choice.

Applying techniques for collecting data

Approaches and techniques

In Chapter 3, we identified a series of research approaches and techniques. The four approaches – action research, case studies, experiments and surveys – provide alternative, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, frameworks for thinking about and planning research projects. They were separately considered in Chapter 3. In this chapter, we will focus on the four main techniques, or methods for producing data, which were identified: documents, interviews, observation and questionnaires.

You might like to take another look at Chapter 3 at this point, particularly the section on **Families, approaches and techniques**.

In the field or at the desk?

The first days in the field are often seen as the most challenging and emotionally awkward. Meeting any new group of people in an environment which they already inhabit can be uncomfortable and embarrassing, but it can be particularly so where those being met are to be research

Box 6.8 Examples of research sampling strategies

Teaching staff from twelve departments in three different faculties (Social Sciences, Arts and Science) were invited to participate in this study in the autumn of 2001. The departments were selected to reflect a broad variety in characteristics such as field, size and culture . . . In all, 52 members of teaching staff took part in 11 focus group discussions. The participants were chosen by departmental self-selection, based on our request that they represent broadly all categories of teaching staff and be individuals who are actively involved in teaching new students.

(Lahteenoja and Pirttila-Backman 2005: 643–4)

This study examines a number of journalistic articles in magazines, tabloids, newspapers and other publications covering the YCC [your concept car] project. In October 2003, 272 articles and press clippings that addressed the YCC project had been registered. In order to get attention from potential and existing female clients, the public relations strategy was to aim for coverage in journals and magazines outside the narrow range of motor journals. Women's magazines and daily newspapers were, for instance, also targeted . . . The total body of text comprised 9987 column centimetres and 181 pictures . . . Most of the 272 articles and press clippings were briefly examined, and those published in languages we neither read nor understand, such as Arabic and Polish, were not integrated into the analysis. Most of these press clippings were more or less based on the information in the press release and reported the facts in neutral terms. Twenty of the articles that were based on interviews with the team members or contained some additional journalistic material, such as commentaries or additional remarks, were selected and carefully reviewed. The 20 documents constituted the textual corpus of the study . . .

(Styhre et al. 2005: 557–8)

We have gathered data on this daily reality of work from workplaces of two kinds: two technology enterprises and municipal youth centres. The data from the technology enterprises were collected by observing collaborative work situations and interviewing a total of 18 design and development engineers; and the data on municipal youth work by observing and audio taping weekly team meetings of youth workers in three municipal youth centres.

(Collin and Valleala 2005: 403)

'subjects' and do not fully understand the nature of ethnographic research. Yet the first days of research are also often seen as particularly exciting, for so much of what is experienced and observed is new to the researcher. Indeed, the researcher is often overwhelmed by the amount of new information that it is necessary to take in.

(Walford 2001: 53)

For many social science researchers, particularly perhaps in anthropology, geography and sociology, the collection of data involves fieldwork. Having refined their research projects, developed their questions and methods, the researchers then 'go into the field' to collect data directly through observation and/or questioning. For such researchers and disciplines, fieldwork has a considerable mystique and associated traditions.

In other cases, and commonly in disciplines such as economics and psychology, fieldwork as such may be unusual. Much research in these subjects is done using pre-existing data, or data which can be collected, perhaps experimentally, within one's employing institution.

You don't have to do fieldwork to be a researcher, even in those disciplines where it is common. You may choose to, if you enjoy it, if your research topic demands it, or if it is expected of you. Or you may, for equally valid reasons, choose not to do fieldwork, but to base your research within the library, office or laboratory. Whether the collection of data for your research project involves fieldwork or not, the processes you go through may be seen as broadly analogous.

Documents

All, or virtually all, research projects involve, to a greater or lesser extent, the use and analysis of documents. Researchers are expected to read, understand and critically analyse the writings of others, whether fellow researchers, practitioners or policy-makers. Considerable attention has, therefore, already been given to the techniques of reading for research.

See Chapter 4, particularly the section on **Good enough reading**, and Chapter 8, especially the section on **How to criticize**.

For some research projects, however, the focus of data collection is wholly, or almost entirely, on documents of various kinds. They might, for example:

- be library-based, aimed at producing a critical synopsis of an existing area of research writing;

- be computer-based, consisting largely of the analysis of previously collected data sets;
- be work-based, drawing on materials produced within an organization;
- have a policy focus, examining materials relevant to a particular set of policy decisions;
- have a historical orientation, making use of available archival and other surviving documentary evidence.

Using documents can be a relatively unobtrusive form of research, one which does not necessarily require you to approach respondents first hand. Rather, you can trace their steps through the documents that they have left behind. While unobtrusive methods do not solely rely on documents – they can also, for example, involve searching dustbins (garbology), looking at gravestones or monuments, and examining graffiti (Lee 2000) – there is no doubt that documents are an invaluable methodological tool. Some examples of research projects which have made considerable use of documents are summarized in Box 6.9, while Box 6.10 lists some documentary sources for social research in the United Kingdom.

Box 6.9 Examples of the use of documents in research

- Mason (1999) interviewed families about their *wills* as part of a research project into family networks and relationships. Questions about who is and who is not listed as a beneficiary can shed light on how stepfamilies view family ties.
- Nixon (2000) examined the *web pages* and *newspaper* reports of a small group of Australian schoolchildren who had been noted for their advanced information technology skills. Her analysis illustrated how their learning was conducted outside of formal school environments, and how this was related to issues of national identity and the commodification of these children's lives.
- Tight (2000) analysed a year's worth of the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* to discover what images of the higher education world it presented. He found varied images of the sector, ranging from one in crisis to one where employment opportunities were plentiful.
- Payne et al. (2004) studied two years' output of four 'mainstream' and one 'specialist' British sociological journals, together with the papers presented at one British Sociological Association annual conference. They were interested in which research methods were being used, concluding that there was a need for more quantitative work.
- Arber and Ginn (1995) used *General Household Survey* data to explore the relationship between informal care and paid work. They found that it is the norm to be in paid work and also be providing informal care.

Box 6.10 UK documentary sources for research**1 Government surveys**

A full listing of these can be found at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>
Examples of the data sets included are:

- Census of Employment
- Census of Population
- Labour Force Survey
- General Household Survey
- Family Expenditure Survey

2 Government legislation

Government white papers and legislative documents are important sources for policy research. The web sites of key government departments offer search facilities and information on the latest policy initiatives. As well as the individual departments listed, try <http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk> for links to many legislative and government bodies.

- Department for Trade & Industry: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/>
- Department for Health: <http://www.doh.gov.uk/>
- Department for Work and Pensions: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/>
- Department for Education and Skills: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/>
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport: <http://www.culture.gov.uk/>

3 Historical records

Research into most aspects of social history (including political and business history) relies on archives.

- The National Register of Archives:
(<http://www.nra.nationalarchives.gov.uk>)
- ARCHON is the principal information gateway for UK archivists and users of manuscript sources for British history: (<http://www.archon.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/>)

4 Media documents

Newspapers, magazines, television and radio all have web sites that can provide interesting sources of data and useful material for research analysis. Web sites of newspapers internationally can be found at <http://library.uncg.edu/news/> These documents are useful for analysis of job and other advertisements, the letters pages, personal columns, obituaries and wedding announcements as well as the news pages.

5 Personal documents

Internet home pages of individuals have been used very creatively for research (see Nixon 2000). More generally, however, researchers will have to rely on paper-based sources. These include diaries, letters, wills and photographs.

6 International organizations

Comparative information on other countries, and on international policies and programmes may be found on the web sites of international organizations, such as the World Bank, World Health Organisation, International Labor Office and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. For example:

<http://www.worldbank.org/>

<http://www.oecd.org/>

Researchers who base their studies on documents may make considerable use of secondary data; that is, data which has already been collected, and possibly also analysed, by somebody else. The most common forms of secondary data are official statistics collected by governments and government agencies. However, the potential for secondary analysis of qualitative data is increasingly being realized.

For further examples of secondary data sets available online, see the section in Chapter 4 on **Using the Internet**, in particular Box 4.5.

As some of the examples in Box 6.9 indicate, secondary analysis can give fresh insights into data, and ready-made data sets or archives do provide extremely valuable and cost-efficient resources for researchers. However, there are several cautions that have to be born in mind. The questions you need to ask of any existing document are:

- What were the conditions of its production? For example, why, and when, was the document produced/written and for whom?
- If you are using statistical data sets, have the variables changed over time? For example 'ethnicity' was not recorded in the British Census until 1991. This means that you cannot undertake some forms of analysis.
- If you are using statistical data sets, have the indicators used to measure variables changed? For example, the measurement of unemployment has undergone many changes in the last two decades. This impacts on any comparative or historical analyses that you might seek to make.

Health warning: Statistics don't fall out of the skies. Like words – of which they are of course an extension – they are constructed by human beings influenced by culture and the predispositions and governing ideas of the organisations and groups within which people work. Statistical methodologies are not timeless creations. They are the current expression of society's attempts to interpret, represent and analyse information about economic and social (and other) conditions. As the years pass they change – not just because there may be technical *advances* but because professional, cultural, political *and* technical conventions change in terms of *retreat* as well as advance . . . Every student of social science . . . needs to be grounded in how information about social conditions is acquired. Statistics form a substantial part of such information. Acquiring information is much more than looking up handbooks of statistics. We have to become self-conscious about the process of selection.

(Townsend 1996: 26)

Exercise 6.3 invites you to consider the reasons for using secondary data. Try it, whether the use of documents forms a major part of your research project or not. You may like to compare your own suggestions with those given in Box 6.11. You may conclude from this both that you cannot really avoid the use of secondary data to some extent, and that it is legitimate and interesting to base your research project entirely upon such data.

Box 6.11 Reasons for using secondary data

- 1 Because collecting primary data is difficult, time-consuming and expensive.
- 2 Because you can never have enough data.
- 3 Because it makes sense to use it if the data you want already exists in some form.
- 4 Because it may shed light on, or complement, the primary data you have collected.
- 5 Because it may confirm, modify or contradict your findings.
- 6 Because it allows you to focus your attention on analysis and interpretation.
- 7 Because you cannot conduct a research study in isolation from what has already been done.
- 8 Because more data is collected than is ever used.

Interviews

The unstructured interview has been variously described as naturalistic, autobiographical, in-depth, narrative or non-directive. Whatever the label used, the informal interview is modelled on the conversation and, like the conversation, is a social event with, in this instance, two participants. As a social event it has its own set of interactional rules which may be more or less explicit, more or less recognised by the participants. In addition to its generally social character, there are several ways in which the interview constitutes a learning process. At the level of this process, participants can discover, uncover or generate the rules by which they are playing this particular game. The interviewer can become more adept at interviewing, in general, in terms of the strategies which are appropriate for eliciting responses, and in particular, in our case, in enabling people to talk about the sensitive topic of sexuality, and thus to disclose more about themselves.

(Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994: 135)

The interview method involves questioning or discussing issues with people. It can be a very useful technique for collecting data which would likely not be accessible using techniques such as observation or questionnaires. Many variations on the interview method are possible: some of the main options are summarized in Box 6.12. Of particular note is the growth of the Internet and focus group interviews. For example, through email, the Internet offers a relatively cheap way of conducting interviews at a distance. Focus groups offer the opportunity to interview a number of people at the same time, and to use the interaction between a group as a source of further insight. Of course, Internet systems allow for both individual and group interviews to be conducted as, through asynchronous conferencing, you can arrange for several people to be online simultaneously. Some contrasting examples of the use of the interview method for research are given in Box 6.13.

If you have decided to carry out a number of interviews for your research project, one of the basic decisions you will have to take is whether to record the interview or to take notes. In practice, of course, you may not have much choice, if, for example, you cannot afford or get access to an audio or digital (or even visual) recorder. If you do decide to record, you may find that some of your interviewees refuse you permission to do so, so you should practice note-taking (during and/or after the interview) whatever your plans.

Each of these strategies has associated advantages and disadvantages:

- Using an audio or digital recorder means that you need only concentrate on the process of the interview. You can focus your attention on the interviewee, give appropriate eye contact and non-verbal communication. You will have a verbatim record of the whole interview.

Box 6.12 Alternative interview techniques

- Interviews may take place face-to-face, or at a distance, e.g. over the telephone or by email.
 - They may take place at the interviewee's or interviewer's home or place of work, in the street or on some other 'neutral' ground.
 - At one extreme, the interview may be tightly structured, with a set of questions requiring specific answers (cf. questionnaires), or it may be very open-ended, taking the form of a discussion. In the latter case, the purpose of the interviewer may be simply to facilitate the subject talking at length. Semi-structured interviews lie between these two positions.
 - Different forms of questioning may be practiced during the interview. In addition to survey questioning, Dillon identified classroom, courtroom and clinical questioning, as well as the domains of personnel interviewing, criminal interrogation and journalistic interviewing (Dillon 1990).
 - Prompts, such as photographs, can be useful for stimulating discussion.
 - Interviews may involve just two individuals, the researcher and the interviewee, or they may be group events (often referred to as focus groups), involving more than one subject and/or more than one interviewer.
 - The interviewee may, or may not, be given advanced warning of the topics or issues to be discussed. This briefing might be very detailed to allow the subject to gather together any necessary detailed information.
 - The interview may be recorded in a variety of ways. It may be taped, and possibly later transcribed by an audio-typist. The interviewer may take notes, during or after the interview, or, where there is more than one interviewer, one might take notes while the other conducted the interview.
 - Interviews may be followed up in a variety of ways. A transcript could be sent to the subject for comment. Further questions might be subsequently sent to the subject in writing. A whole series of interviews could be held over a period of time, building upon each other or exploring changing views and experiences.
-
- Recording may, however, make respondents anxious, and less likely to reveal confidential information. Audio recorders have a habit of not working properly from time to time, and there can be awkward pauses when you start, stop or change tapes. Recordings also take a long time to transcribe and analyse.
 - Note-taking gives you an instant record of the key points of an interview. You do not need to acquire an audio or digital recorder, and do not need to worry about initial sorting, categorizing and analysing of the data collected.
 - However, note-taking can also be distracting. Putting pen to paper may lead interviewees to think that they have said something significant. Conversely, when you don't make a note, they may think that you find their

Box 6.13 Examples of using interviews in research

For his MA dissertation, Shu-Ming wanted to interview his ex-colleagues working in Taiwan about their experiences of mentoring. He drew up a sample and, using email, sent each of them a brief outline of his topic, its purposes and some details of how he planned to conduct the research, including the amount of time it would require of respondents and the broader time-scale within which he was operating. His colleagues responded very positively, but there was an immediate problem. They were unfamiliar with the concept of mentoring, and so Shu-Ming's early work with them was to explain what he had understood about mentoring from studying in England. These initial interviews developed more into on-line tutorials than an exchange between peers, but the data that was produced was extremely useful in highlighting the culturally specific meanings of mentoring. Using this data, Shu-Ming's dissertation was refocused so that it explored the implications of on-line learning and research in the context of these culturally specific meanings. As a result, later interviews were conducted with his interviewees about their changing understandings and knowledge of mentoring.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) used interviews to explore fear of crime with those whom they describe as 'defended subjects'. These are people who will protect themselves against any anxieties arising from the information provided in a research context. For example, defended subjects may not hear the questions in the same ways as other interviewees, and they may not know why they experience or feel things in the ways they do. They may invest in particular discourses to protect vulnerable aspects of themselves, and unconscious motivations may disguise the meanings of some of their feelings and actions. Hollway and Jefferson illustrate how early interview approaches were disappointing, but they argue that the problem 'went deeper than a few mistakes, which all interviewers make – through tiredness, lapses of concentration, a clumsily worded question or tapping into unknown (and unknowable) sensitivities' (p. 30). In consequence, they argue that a biographical-interpretative method was more appropriate than traditional interview approaches. This method has four principles: use open questions, elicit stories, avoid 'why' questions and follow respondents' ordering and phrasing. In addition, Hollway and Johnson argue that in their research the use of free association was an important adaptation of the biographical-interpretive method.

In our research study, an array of outside experts had approved a research protocol which outlined that eight focus groups would take place over a

12-month period: each group would involve between eight and ten users. The project's full-time research assistant spent considerable time at the gym making links with service users with a view to recruiting participants to the first focus group. Although payment of expenses was offered to participants, recruitment proved difficult. Many users were unwilling to take part in a focus group, and half of those who agreed to take part failed to attend on the day. The research assistant for the project felt that she had developed a good relationship with users, so in the end, we began to ask direct questions about what prevented them from joining focus groups.

(Truman 2003)

comments unimportant. Concentrating on asking questions, listening to the responses *and* taking notes is a complex process, and you will not get a complete verbatim record. If you leave taking notes until after the interview, you are likely to forget important details.

If you do decide to record your interviews, bear in mind that the most expensive recorder is not necessarily the best. A solid, second-hand and relatively cheap tape recorder may be a sound investment. The key qualities are that it is not too large or heavy, that it can work off batteries as well as the mains, and that it can record quiet talkers when there is a lot of background noise. The availability of good quality play-back equipment may also be an issue for you. If you are listening to or watching recorded material, and taking notes on the content, then a foot-operated on/off button can be invaluable.

Health warning: Interview tapes take a great deal of time to transcribe and analyse. Tizard and Hughes (1991) made recordings of children at school and at home to study how they learnt. Each hour of the home tapes, which included a lot of talk, took 12 hours to transcribe and a further 5 hours to check and add context. The transcripts of the home tapes averaged 60 typed A4 pages.

Another key issue in carrying out interviews, as well as other forms of questioning like questionnaires, is how best to ask potentially sensitive questions. These may include, for example, the age of your respondents, and their ethnic group, marital status, income, social class and educational level. Exercise 6.4 invites you to consider this problem. Some possible answers are given in Box 6.14. Compare them with your suggestions, and try them out in practice to see how well they work.

Box 6.14 Different ways of asking sensitive questions

About age:

- ask for year of birth
- or the year when they left school
- or how old their first child is
- or when they are due to retire

About ethnic group:

- ask them to select from a range of options
- or to write it down for you
- or ask them how they would like you to describe their ethnic group
- or make an assessment yourself

About income:

- ask them if they could afford to buy a new car or house
- or whether they would regard their income as above average, average or below average
- or which of a number of income bands they come in

Hint: Instead of asking all of your questions directly and verbally, you could make some use of prompt cards, particularly for sensitive questions, and ask your interviewee to point to the answer.

Observations

Doing participant observation research is riddled with dilemmas. As an observer/researcher I did not want my presence to affect the group dynamics I was attempting to study. But as a participant – a volunteer – I often found it impossible to avoid being drawn into relationships with members of Proteus [a creative workshop for people with learning difficulties], thereby changing the context of my research. I tried to do the ‘right thing’ for my research participants, even if this was at odds with my research. In Gail’s case, I did not want to ‘control’ or ‘contain’ her (as had happened to her during most of her earlier life living in institutions), I merely wanted to prevent her from being ostracized from the group. In doing what I saw as the right thing, I often found I had to compromise my research role.

(Hallowell et al. 2005: 61)

How people see and understand their surroundings will no doubt play a part in the ways in which they behave, they act and interact with others, and in the ways their actions are perceived by others. Observation is an extremely handy tool for researchers in this regard. It can allow researchers to understand much more about what goes on in complex

Box 6.15 Examples of the use of observation in research

. . . we resolved to concentrate as much as possible on studying positive aspects of human interaction. With this new focus, we were now no longer obliged to seek out violent pubs, but could spend time in pleasant ones . . . We could observe ordinary, law-abiding people doing their shopping, instead of interviewing security guards and store detectives about the activities of shoplifters and vandals. We went to nightclubs to study flirting rather than fighting. When I noticed some unusually sociable and courteous interaction among the crowds at a racecourse, I immediately began what turned out to be three years of research on the factors influencing the good behaviour of racegoers. We also conducted research on celebration, cyber-dating, summer holidays, embarrassment, corporate hospitality, van drivers, risk taking, the London Marathon, sex, mobile-phone gossip and the relationship between tea-drinking and DIY (this last dealing with burning social issues such as 'how many cups of tea does it take the average Englishman to put up a shelf?').

(Fox 2004: 5–6)

That night I learned something very important about scaboos [Special Care Baby Units or SCBUs] and, indeed, other front-line medical situations – day and night are quite different. There are fewer people around, and the atmosphere is much more relaxed. Unless there are major emergencies people have more time to sit and talk. Professional boundaries become much weaker. There are no visitors. A lot of coffee gets drunk. Home life and all sorts of issues beyond the scaboo are discussed. I quickly found that some of the conversations that had not happened during my daytime visits were easy to have at night. And so I became a night worker. Sometimes there were emergencies and occasionally babies died. When these things had happened during the day, screens were drawn and I felt I should keep out of the way. At night the nurses and doctors seemed to feel I should share all they had to do. Later on I began to stay over the shift changes and resumed my daytime visits. Luckily, what seemed to have become a changed role persisted into the daylight hours. Finally, I had become a participant in the life of the SCBU, not just an observer.

(Hallowell et al. 2005: 83)

real-world situations than they can ever discover simply by asking questions of those who experience them (no matter how probing the questions may be), and by looking only at what is said about them in questionnaires and interviews.

(Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003: 117)

The observation method involves the researcher in watching, recording and analysing events of interest. Two examples of its use by postgraduate students are given in Box 6.15 (previous page).

As the quotations and examples given indicate, a range of different approaches are possible in observation studies:

- the events may be recorded, either at the time or subsequently, by the researcher, or they may be recorded mechanically (including through photographs);
- the observation may be structured in terms of a predetermined framework, or may be relatively open;
- the observer may also be a participant in the events being studied, or may act solely as a 'disinterested' observer.

These differences are analogous to those already noted for interviews. There are, of course, many other details which need to be considered before you begin your observations. Box 6.16 outlines some of the key questions.

Box 6.16 Issues in observation

- 1 Are the times at which you carry out your observations relevant?
- 2 Do you need to devise an observational schedule or determine pre-coded categories? If so, you might like to test these out in a pilot observation before they are finalized.
- 3 If the answer to the last question was negative, how are you going to organize your data recording?
- 4 Is it important to you to try and record 'everything', or will you be much more selective?
- 5 Are your age, sex, ethnicity, dress or other characteristics likely to affect your observations?
- 6 How artificial is the setting? How visible are you as the observer? Does this matter?
- 7 Is observation enough, or will you need to participate, and/or use other means of data collection?
- 8 Are there any situations to which you cannot get access but where observation may be important? How can you get 'off the road' or 'backstage'?
- 9 If you are going to participate more directly in the events you will be observing, how are you going to balance the demands of participation and observation? Again, you should find some practice beneficial here.

Using observation as a method of collecting data – whether you also act as a participant in the events you are observing or not – is, like interviewing, potentially very time consuming. The time absorbed occurs not just during the observation, but afterwards as well, when you come to interpret and analyse what you have recorded. Pre-categorizing and structuring your observations can reduce the time commitment dramatically, though at the risk of losing both detail and flexibility.

At one extreme, where the researcher's focus is on a limited number of specific events, and with noting or measuring participants' responses to certain stimuli, the observational technique shades into the experimental approach. At another, where the observer is a key and active participant in the events being studied, it shades into action research.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are one of the most widely used social research techniques. The idea of formulating precise written questions, for those whose opinions or experience you are interested in, seems such an obvious strategy for finding the answers to the issues that interest you. But, as anyone who has tried to put a questionnaire together will tell you – and then tried again to interpret the responses – it is not as simple as it might seem.

Box 6.17 (page 180) summarizes two examples of the use of questionnaires in social research, and, in doing so, begins to suggest some of the potential difficulties in devising and using questionnaires.

There are a number of different ways in which questionnaires can be administered. They can be sent by post to the intended respondents, who are then expected to complete and return them themselves (preferably, if you want them to respond, using a reply-paid envelope). They can be administered over the telephone or face-to-face, in the latter case becoming much like a highly structured interview. They can be sent over the Internet.

Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages. Face-to-face surveys may get a better response rate, but are more time consuming for the researcher. Postal and email surveys are likely to have lower response rates, and possibly poorer answers because the respondent has no one available to answer any queries; but they may allow a larger number of people to be surveyed.

Just as questionnaires can be administered by different means, so there are a variety of ways in which questions can be asked. Box 6.18 (page 181) illustrates seven basic question types: quantity or information, category, list or multiple choice, scale, ranking, complex grid or table, and open-ended. These types may be combined in various ways to give questions of increasing complexity.

Box 6.17 Examples of the use of questionnaires in research

To answer our specific research questions on the use of GAs [graphic accents], we developed a three-condition survey study that we planned to conduct via the Internet. To that end, we drew on traditional methods of questionnaire design . . . Our survey instrument contained extensive formatting to maximise clarity in the electronic environment. Each questionnaire element included (a) response scales with each item so that it would not be necessary for end users to scroll up and down if they wished to refer to the scales, (b) response boxes aligned on the left margin to minimize keystrokes, and (c) graphic rules and white space for maximum readability. We then set about pretesting the questionnaire with friends and acquaintances. To our surprise, even though these particular respondents knew us and supported our project, they were either unwilling or unable to complete the questionnaire and return it. It was clear that data collection through e-mail potentially could stall our project . . . We therefore suspected that the low response to our preliminary questionnaire might be, at least in part, the result of its length. Our instrument consisted of 42 stimulus items, which were constituted of 12,860 characters and formatted to 384 lines. This translated to 19 screens on a desktop computer.

(Witmer et al. 1999: 145–8)

In developing the questionnaire, the first requirement was to identify the potential range of specialist industry knowledge that may be of benefit to the auditor. Thus, the instrument included areas that have been noted in the literature, professional standards of prior research as being potentially important knowledge for industry specialist auditors. To ensure other important knowledge items that were not listed in the questionnaire would nonetheless be identified, participants were provided with an opportunity to add additional knowledge items to the end of each knowledge category. Based on the literature review and categorisations used in the standards, six broad knowledge categories, capturing 29 knowledge items, were constructed.

(Simnett and Wright 2005: 91)

As the examples given so far may have suggested, there are a number of issues to be considered when wording questions for survey purposes. While there is, of course, no such thing as the ideal questionnaire, some basic guidelines regarding question wording are given in Box 6.19 (page 182). Box 6.20 (page 183) adds to these with some suggestions as to how questionnaires might best be laid out and presented.

Box 6.18 Types of survey questions**1 Quantity or information**

In which year did you enrol on the part-time degree? _____

2 Category

Have you ever been, or are you now, involved almost full-time in domestic duties (i.e. as a housewife/househusband)?

Yes (currently) Yes (in the past) Never

3 List or multiple choice

Do you view the money spent on your higher education as any of the following?

a luxury an investment a necessity
 a gamble a burden a right
 none of these

4 Scale

How would you describe your parents' attitude to higher education at that time?
 Please tick one of the options below:

very positive positive mixed/neutral negative very negative not sure

5 Ranking

What do you see as the main purpose(s) of your degree study? Please rank all those relevant in order from 1 downwards:

personal development career advancement
 subject interest recreation
 fulfil ambition keeping stimulated
 other (please write) _____

6 Complex grid or table

How would you rank the benefits of your degree study for each of the following?
 Please rank each item:

for:	very positive	positive	neutral	negative	very negative	not sure
you						
your family						
your employer						
the country						
your community						
your friends						

7 Open-ended

We would like to hear from you if you have any further comments.

Box 6.19 Hints on wording questions

- Try and avoid questions which are ambiguous or imprecise, or which assume specialist knowledge on the part of the respondent.
- Remember that questions which ask respondents to recall events or feelings that occurred long ago may be answered with a lesser degree of accuracy.
- Two or three simple questions are usually better than one very complex one.
- Try not to draft questions which presume a particular answer, or lead the respondent on, but allow for all possible responses.
- Avoid too many questions which are couched in negative terms; though in some cases, such as when you are asking a series of attitude questions, it can be useful to mix positive and negative questions.
- Remember that hypothetical questions, beyond the experience of the respondent, are likely to attract a less accurate response.
- Avoid questions which may be offensive, and couch sensitive questions in a way and in a place (e.g. at the end of the questionnaire) such that they are not likely to affect your overall response rate.
- Do not ask too many open-ended questions: they take too much time to answer properly, and too much time to analyse.
- If asking questions in a different language, have them translated from English, and then back-translated into English, to ensure accuracy of translation.

If you follow these guidelines, you should be able to produce a competent questionnaire, though you are unlikely to produce a foolproof one. There will always be at least one question which proves to be inadequate, or which brings an indignant response. You would be well advised, as with the use of any research technique, to pilot your questionnaire before you carry out the full survey, and to modify your questions in the light of the responses you receive.

Recording your progress

As we noted in Chapter 4, meticulousness is an important skill for the researcher to develop. This is as true during the data collection phase of your research as it is when you are reading. There are two key aspects to recording the process of data collection: keeping notes on the progress of your project, and chasing up.

See also the section on **Recording your reading** in Chapter 4.

Box 6.20 Hints on questionnaire layout and presentation

- Questionnaires should be typed or printed, clearly and attractively laid out, using a typeface size which is legible.
- If you are administering your questionnaires by post or email, you should enclose a covering letter identifying yourself and describing the purposes of your survey, and providing a contact address or telephone number.
- If you are administering your questionnaires face-to-face, or over the telephone, you should introduce yourself first, give a contact address or telephone number if requested, and be prepared to answer questions about your survey.
- If the questions you are asking are at all sensitive, and this will be the case for almost any questionnaire, you should start by assuring your respondents of the confidentiality of their individual replies.
- Make sure any instructions you give on how the respondent is expected to answer the questions are clear.
- It is usually better to keep the kind of response expected – ticking, circling or writing in – constant.
- It is desirable that the length of the questionnaire is kept within reasonable limits, but at the same time it is better to space questions well so that the questionnaire does not appear cramped.
- If the questionnaire is lengthy or complicated, and you are expecting a substantial number of replies, you should think about coding the answers in advance on the questionnaire to speed up data input.
- Remember to thank your respondents at the end of the questionnaire, and to invite their further comments and questions.

Keeping notes

To record, and reflect upon, your progress during this phase, you will need to keep notes in some form. These may deal with your plans, how they change in practice, your reactions, what you read, what you think, significant things that people say to you, and what you discover.

You do have considerable flexibility about how you keep records of the progress of your research project. Here are some alternatives:

- *Research diaries*: an ideal way of keeping a record of what you are doing, feeling and thinking throughout the research project as it happens.

See the section in Chapter 2 on **Keeping your research diary**.

- *Boxes or files*: keep all the material you are collecting in a number of boxes, one for each subject or chapter.
- *Coloured paper and sticky notes*: some people find these a helpful, even fun, way of organizing their records.
- *Computers*: you may input your thoughts, records and references direct onto a computer. Software is available to help extract, arrange and index materials. Remember to keep a back up copy, and to print out an up-to-date version every so often.

See the section in Chapter 5 on **Using computers**.

- *Card indexes*: these can be particularly useful for keeping details of references, organized by author or subject.

Some examples of the alternative strategies developed by actual small-scale social science researchers for keeping research records are included in Box 6.21.

Box 6.21 Keeping research records

William decided that he would keep all his material according to its relevancy to particular chapters of his thesis. He made this decision after a few months of his research, when he was feeling overwhelmed and directionless. Putting material into chapter files helped him gain a sense of progress and control, although he recognized that he would subsequently move material between files.

Jez decided that she would not use cards as the basis of her bibliographic index, as they would not be easily transportable. Instead, she bought a notebook with alphabetic sections and used this to record her growing literature. It provided her with a manageable resource which she subsequently typed onto her laptop.

Mary wanted to store the different types of material she was collecting according to type. She therefore used A4 box files, which were categorized in terms of literature reviews, interview transcripts, respondents' completed diaries and tape recordings.

Vena was going to do most of her literature research online, using electronic databases and journals. Her supervisor recommended that she learn to use RefWorks before she began.

Hint: However you decide to keep a record of your research in progress, it is very sensible to keep at least two copies of your records, each in a different place. Spare yourself the heartache of lost and irreplaceable files.

Chasing up

The other aspect to being meticulous is chasing up your own progress, and the responses that you are expecting from others. Your research plans may look fine on paper, and you may have allowed plenty of time for collecting data, but you cannot expect other people to be as enthusiastic about, and committed to, your research as you are yourself. You may not be able to readily access all of the documents that interest you. Not everybody will readily grant your requests for interviews. You may be denied access to some of the events or settings which you wish to observe. The response rate to your questionnaire survey may be disappointing.

What can you do about this? There are two kinds of responses, which can be used in conjunction. On the one hand, you may need to be realistic and flexible about your expectations for collecting data. You don't need a 100 percent response rate; you don't need to read every last word written on your subject area; perhaps it doesn't matter if you don't interview every member of the management team or observe every meeting. You can get a great deal of information without experiencing everything, and even then you'll probably never have time to analyse it all.

On the other hand, you can increase your response rate significantly by keeping tabs on your progress and assiduously following up your respondents. Possible strategies here might include:

- sending reminder letters to potential survey respondents who have not replied by your initial deadline;
- telephoning unwilling interviewees on a number of occasions;
- making yourself amenable to the librarian or custodian of the documents which you wish to get access to;
- maintaining regular contacts with the key people, or gatekeepers, for your research.

The ups and downs of data collection

The process of collecting data may be quite a lengthy and demanding part of your research project. It may be a part which you particularly enjoy, or you may dislike it intensely. Either way, however, you are likely to encounter ups

and downs during the process. There may be days when you really enjoy yourself, when you discover something interesting, or when somebody says something which casts your whole project in a new and exciting light. There will also be days when you can barely force yourself to do the necessary work, when you just go through the motions, or when you begin to doubt where it is all leading. Things will go wrong, and you will have to find ways of coping.

This section identifies two of the most common 'downs' encountered when collecting data – loneliness and obsessiveness – and suggests how you might counter them. It then offers some positive thoughts about how you might ensure that you get more enjoyment out of data collection. Finally, the issue of when to stop collecting data is discussed.

Loneliness

All researchers, even those who are involved in group research, have to learn how to cope with working alone. For some it may be enjoyable, but for others it can be stressful. It is, however, an essential part of research, since it is you who has to decide at the end about the meaning of what you are doing. It will affect you even if you are working on a project close to your heart and with people you can relate to comfortably.

Loneliness is, therefore, inevitable, and is particularly prevalent during the process of data collection. Alan Sillitoe once wrote a book entitled, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, but there is little to compare with the feelings of the lone researcher, particularly if they are conducting a lengthy piece of research.

A special form of isolation is common if you are carrying out fieldwork. In such cases, you will commonly be both an insider, having been accepted by the individuals, groups or institutions you are researching, and an outsider. However well you are accepted, you will still not be one of them. You may become a member of their group for a time, but you will simultaneously be operating as an external observer and analyst of the group's activities. The dual roles of stranger and colleague, of insider and outsider, can be difficult to manage and sustain psychologically (this can also occur if you are researching in your own workplace).

Your loneliness will be magnified if you have no one sympathetic with whom you can discuss your progress and problems. This will be particularly so if your supervisor, manager or colleagues are unhelpful, or if you are conducting an obscure, sensitive or challenging piece of research. This is why it is so important to spend time, when beginning your research, on developing your support networks.

You may like to refer back to the section on **Sharing responsibility** in Chapter 5.

The other way to combat loneliness is to compartmentalize your research, to give it a certain time and space in your life, but no more, making sure that you leave opportunities for you to maintain and engage in some of your other interests.

Obsessiveness

The problem of obsessiveness may be closely related to that of feeling alone, particularly if you are carrying out your research project on your own. Research may be both an intensely stimulating and very demanding experience. Whether you are conducting it on a part-time or full-time basis, it can take over your life, so beware! It may come to take up every spare moment that you have. You may want to talk about nothing else. You may be unable to wait to get back into the library, or for your next interview, observation or experiment. Research can get into your dreams!

This is likely, however, to cause you problems with your family, friends and colleagues, even with those who have been most ardent and reliable in supporting your research work. It can also be damaging to your research, as you can lose your understanding of the broader context for your work. The phrase 'going native' is used to describe a particularly severe form of research obsessiveness. It originated in an anthropological context, but has a more general application as well. The researcher who has gone native has become so immersed in the subject of their research that they are unable to separate their interest from those of their research subjects. They have lost the distance, strangeness or disassociation which is usually so important for the researcher.

Most researchers probably get obsessive about their research at one time or another. This may actually be useful or essential, for example if you are under pressure towards the end of the project to get it written up and finished on time. More generally, though, obsessiveness is to be guarded against. Three basic strategies which might help you are:

- Planning and scheduling your research from the start, and revising your plans regularly throughout the project so as to keep the work required feasible. This should make it less likely that you will need to devote a disproportionate amount of your time to the research at any one point, and hence reduce the likelihood of your becoming obsessive.

You may find it useful to look again at the sections on **Managing time** and **Mapping your project** in Chapter 5.

- Instructing a friend, relative or colleague to take on the responsibility for identifying when you become obsessive, telling you so and distracting you from your research. This will need to be someone you both trust and respect, and who is capable of putting up with your possibly terse reaction.

- Developing and using a network of fellow researchers, so that you can share your progress and concerns, take an interest in the work of others, and get support in this way.

The section in Chapter 5 on **Sharing responsibility** suggests how you might go about networking and seeking support.

How to enjoy data collection

As the previous discussion indicates, doing research can become fascinating and all absorbing. The process of collecting data has its attractions as well as its drawbacks. So how might you enable yourself to enjoy data collection more? Some suggestions have already been made earlier in this book.

One obvious strategy is to focus on a topic, or a methodology or a group of research subjects which you find of particular interest.

The section in Chapter 2 on **Choosing a topic** suggests how you might go about this.

There will probably be times, however, when the attraction of your project, and in particular the data collection involved, pales a little, regardless of how interesting it is or how well motivated you are.

Another strategy is to deliberately combine the process of collecting data with other activities which give you pleasure. These might include, for example, visiting friends, tea shops (our favourite!), football grounds, bookshops or other places of interest.

Take pleasure in your progress and achievements, and try not to be too down-hearted when you experience setbacks. Allow yourself little rewards along the way. You'll miss it when it's over!

When to stop collecting data

You may find great pleasure in data collection, particularly if it takes you away from your everyday world into an arena which you find interesting or attractive. You may doubt that you have collected sufficient data for the purposes of your research, and continue to search for further information to confirm, complement or deny your understanding. You may wish to delay beginning the analysis and writing up of your research findings.

However, unless you have an open-ended schedule and as many resources as you need for your research, it is critically important that you stop collecting data at a certain point or time. You should have drawn up a schedule or timetable, and will have allocated only so much time to the data collection process.

Even allowing for some leeway, this period cannot be indefinitely extended if you are to complete within a reasonable time.

There is another issue here however. In small-scale research, you cannot expect to collect all the data you might like. No social research project, in a more general sense, is ever going to provide the last, definitive word on any topic. The purpose of small-scale research is likely to be a mixture of practical application, illumination, self-directed learning and/or research training. You should not, therefore, place yourself under enormous pressure to produce the 'perfect' piece of work. So:

- keep to your schedule as much as possible;
- collect only sufficient data, allowing particularly for the time and facilities which you will have available for analysing it;
- move on to analysing your data as soon as you have collected sufficient.

Summary

Having read this chapter, you should:

- have an appreciation of the complex access and ethical issues involved in doing social research;
- be aware of how you might go about sampling and selecting cases to research;
- better understand the different ways in which the use of documents, interviews, observations and questionnaires could contribute to your research project;
- be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of these different techniques for collecting data;
- be better prepared to cope with the ups and downs of the data collection experience.

Exercises

- 6.1 Who or what do you want to research? Who are the key individuals, gatekeepers or stakeholders that you need to get permission from? How much of your respondents' time will you need? Is this reasonable? What potential problems do you anticipate with regard to access? Are there any rules about recording informed consent with which you will have to comply?

- 6.2 Identify the sampling strategy, or strategies, you plan to adopt for your research project. Justify this choice, and explore the merits of other strategies.
- 6.3 How will, or might, you use secondary data in your research project? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?
- 6.4 In a face-to-face interview, how would you ask a stranger about their age, ethnic group, marital status, sexuality, income, social class and educational level? What could you do to help ensure the accuracy of their response?

Further reading

In this section, we list a limited selection of books that are of particular relevance to the topics discussed in this chapter, together with an indication of their contents.

Arksey, H. and Knight, P. (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists: An Introductory Resource with Examples*. London: Sage.

This text covers the whole process of interview-based research from design through practice to transcription, analysis and reporting. Different approaches to interviewing, specialized contexts, and ethical issues are also given attention.

Best, S. and Krueger, B. (2004) *Internet Data Collection*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Covers the different stages of the data collection process, including sampling, instrument design and administration, drawing particular attention to the potential dangers and particular conventions of the Internet.

Czaya, R. and Blair, J. (2005) *Designing Surveys: A Guide to Decisions and Procedures*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Written for first-time researchers, this book is a guide to undertaking a survey. It includes sections on data collection, designing a questionnaire and sampling.

Gregory, I. (2003) *Ethics in Research*. London: Continuum.

Short text covering consent, confidentiality and related issues.

Hallowell, N., Lawton, J. and Gregory, S. (eds) (2005) *Reflections on Research: The Realities of Doing Research in the Social Sciences*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Forty-three contributors offer reflections on the place of emotions, self, others, control and ethics in research.

Keats, D. M. (2000) *Interviewing: A Practical Guide for Students and Professionals*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Considers the structure and process of interviews, their use in research and

other settings, and the particular issues involved in interviewing children, adolescents, the aged, people with disabilities, and people from different cultural backgrounds.

Lee-Treweek, G. and Linkogle, S. (eds) (2000) *Danger in the Field: Risk and Ethics in Social Research*. New York: Routledge.

Uses researchers' reflexive accounts of encounters with physical, emotional, ethical and professional danger.

Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J. and Miller, T. (2002) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Addresses both theoretical and practical aspects of ethics, including discussion of access, informed consent, negotiating participation and tensions in researching as a professional.

O Dochartaigh, N. (2002) *The Internet Research Handbook: A Practical Guide for Students and Researchers in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.

Aims to set out best practice in the use of the Internet as a mainstream research resource.

Oliver, P. (2003) *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Using case studies, covers ethics throughout the research process, including discussion of consent, confidentiality and dissemination.

Prior, L. (2003) *Using Documents in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Covers the nature of documents, documents in organizational settings, making meaning of documents, and using documents as evidence.

Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (2004) *Focus Group Practice*. London: Sage.

Relates the practice of focus group moderation to underlying theory.

Richards, L. (2005) *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.

A practical guide, focusing on the development of skills in the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

Rossmann, G. and Rallis, S. (2003) *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Uses student characters and three themes – research is a learning process, research can and should be useful, and the researcher needs a clear vision – to help readers grasp the issues.

Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. (2004) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Considers how choice of topic influences question wording, and how the questions asked influence the findings.

Sapsford, R. and Jupp, V. (eds) (2006) *Data Collection and Analysis*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

An overview of issues in research design, data collection and analysis for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The most common methods are covered, including observation, questioning, databases and documents, along with statistical and multivariate analysis, and documentary and textual analysis.

Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Discusses the evaluation of qualitative research, and provides guidance on the collection of good quality data and its thoughtful analysis. Chapters examine issues such as contradiction, generalization, reliability and reflexivity.

Swann, J. and Pratt, J. (eds) (2003) *Educational Research in Practice: Making Sense of Methodology*. London: Continuum.

Experienced practitioners address a common set of questions about their research: what they do, why they do it, its methodological basis and perceived outcomes.

Walford, G. (2001) *Doing Qualitative Educational Research: A Personal Guide to the Research Process*. London: Continuum.

Seeks to get below the surface of research by reflecting upon the trials and tribulations, and problems and promises, of conducting research in the field.

Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-structured Methods*. London: Sage.

Organized in six parts, covering: concepts and approaches, strategies for getting the right materials, contact management, working the materials, comparison of cases, writing up.

Wilkinson, D. and Birmingham, P. (2003) *Using Research Instruments: A Guide for Researchers*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Six chapters cover questionnaires, interviews, content analysis, focus groups, observation, and the things people say and do.