Key Concepts in Social Research

Geoff Payne & Judy Payne



Key Concepts in Social Research

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Key Concepts in Social Research



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introduction

please start here

There are lots of good books on social research methods, so why choose this one? Five good reasons.

First, if you have just begun to look at this book, please do start here. It explains the way we have presented the information. Many research methods books are too complicated. Some take you through the whole of the research process as if you were doing a piece of research – which is fine if that is what you are actually doing. Others go into far too much detail. That can be useful if you are working through a project, or are training to be a social research worker. But that doesn't apply to most students, most of the time.

It certainly doesn't apply if 'social research methods' is only one module in the programme you are taking, or part of a subsidiary subject. Too much information makes it hard to find your way around, and to sort out the more useful parts. Most students don't need all that. If you have a class presentation or term test to prepare for, what you need to get started are the basic important points. If you want to go further or are tackling a dissertation, we give suggestions for other reading, and enough coverage to provide a solid base for the ambitious or more advanced reader to get started. But what this book aims to do is to start you off with the core elements: it keeps it short and to the point.

Second, the way many other books explain things is not always straightforward. Experts often assume that you know a lot more than you do. Researchers tend to write in a way that is fine for the specialist, extra keen or very bright student (because that is the kind of student they were themselves). Most students aren't like that. You have other, wider interests and calls on your time. You are faced with assessment deadlines. You need a straight answer. We have been teaching research methods for many years, and that's something we have learned. We know what explanations are clear, and what works for students, how much previous learning to expect, and what to emphasise and what to leave out. We have kept it simple. Third, **this book is easy to use and focused**. It sticks to 50 key concepts (that is, both ideas and techniques) that come up most often in social research methods courses and research. We have also included some topics to help with particular confusions some students have reported to us in the past. It is a book of '50 key concepts', not '*the* 50 key concepts' (universal agreement on a top 50 is an impossible dream).

For example, we have not found space for 'statistical inference' techniques, 'multivariate analysis' and details of software packages, or for the research styles of some important schools of sociology like post-modernism, symbolic interactionism and constructivism, or certain research techniques like discourse analysis and graphical displays. There are lots of other specialist textbooks that deal with such issues, and you can't please everyone! Our choice of 50 concepts has been made with the needs of social science students, not professional researchers, in mind. The selection is also influenced by our accumulated experience over several decades as empirical researchers ourselves. We see real life research as being untidy, bedevilled with practical problems, and seldom living up to the remarkably high standards of theoretical textbooks. This book is for you.

Fourth, the concepts treated in this book are easy to locate and well cross-referenced. You can find the main entry for the topic you are seeking in the Contents list. The concepts are listed in alphabetic order, and are cross-referenced in each section by 'links' to related topics. Each section is written in simple language, with as few technical terms as possible. Where we *have* used technical terms that you need to know, they are usually marked in the text by single inverted commas (e.g. 'indepth interviews'). Other significant words or terms are highlighted by italics. This should help you quickly spot the key points when they are mentioned only briefly or contained in longer sentences. We give concrete examples as we go along, to illustrate each concept and ground it in direct experience.

Fifth, each section has been **designed to give you enough information to get started, without being too long**. We aim to give you more than a dictionary or encyclopaedia would, so that you get straight to the basics. If you then want to follow up the concept in another source, you will be better equipped to do so.

In case you do want to go further, we include some references to other sources in each section. Each References section is divided into two parts: the first offering mainly general information and alternative explanations, and second, those publications that mainly give examples, some 'classics' and some very recent and easily available. In fact, the two types often overlap. We include some internet sources (and discuss using them), but as web addresses change so rapidly, there is little point in trying to produce a print technology address book listing electronic sites.

We do, however, highlight terms and ideas in each summary, so that you check your own understanding as you go along. Immediately following this Preface, there is a User's Guide to explain the layout of each section. It is worth looking at this before you go on to look at the individual sections. We want the book to do what you want.

We hope you find this book useful. It is a book for 'dipping into' rather than reading from cover to cover. You can tailor your reading of the different sections to suit your own needs and what is required by the modules you are taking. Although social research methods is a technical subject, it doesn't have to be a dry one. There is little point in treating research as just a set of practical skills, or alternatively as involving a lot of abstract theory. We have tried to connect a description of what researchers *do* with an outline of the ideas that explain *why* they do things that way. Each concept contributes towards building a fuller picture: as you grasp each one, they will slowly fit together into a whole.

What matters most is that once you have read a section, you feel confident about the particular concept that you have to deal with. The overall picture will take care of itself while you concentrate on gaining that confidence with each concept. Understanding the social sciences is easier, and a lot more fun, when you begin to see the way people actually do their research. 'Knowledge' about the social world comes from studying it. The credibility of that knowledge depends on how well that 'studying' is carried out – which is what social research methods is all about.

user's guide

One sentence definition

Evaluation Studies: Evaluation Studies assess the processes and consequences of innovation in social policy or organisations.

Summary Outline of points covered in the section **Section Outline:** Evaluation studies as applied social research. Measuring and explaining social change. Problems with 'external' evaluators. Programme specifications driven by evaluation: 'measurable outcomes'. Focusing on 'process' or 'outcome'? Working with evaluatees. Evaluating programmes: who is involved; how are they involved; did it work? Power and politics in evaluation. Example: the Health Education Authority.

Evaluative research is undertaken to assess the worth or success

of something: a programme, a policy, or a project. Social

evaluation is not a method or technique like social surveys or

participant observation. It is a particular and increasingly

common type of applied social research that might employ any

of the other research methods discussed in this book. What

distinguishes it is its purpose: its action orientation to support

Evaluation studies focus on measurements (numeric or

descriptive, but usually the former) of social inputs, outputs, and

processes: it typically studies change. At their most basic,

evaluations replicate classic scientific experimental methods

(Experiments). Thus observations of people are made before and after something is done to them, and the two observations are compared. If there are differences in the observations, this is likely to be attributed to what was done. However, human behaviour involves more factors than can easily be controlled in a laboratory experiment. Was it the intervention or some other factor that produced the observed differences? Few evaluations include a 'control group' (Experiments), which weakens their

or introduce change (Clarke and Dawson, 1999).

Detailed discussion in about 1250 words (in this example, only part is shown)

Links to other sections in the book highlighted

Key words or terms, to check your own understanding

Key Words

credibility.

collaborative evaluation social inputs and outputs measurable outcomes processual evaluation stakeholders

Links

Action Research Experiments

REFERENCES

General

Clarke, A. and Dawson, R. (1999) *Evaluation Research*. London: Sage.

House, E. and Howe, K. (1999) Values in Evaluation and Social Research. London: Sage.

Examples

Curtice, L. (1993) 'The WHO Healthy Cities Project in Europe' in J. Davies and M. Kelly (eds), *Healthy Cities: Research and Practice*. London: Routledge.

References to sources, other longer accounts and examples of use

key concepts

Key Concepts in Social Research

Action Research

Action research is research which, identifying a social problem, is primarily designed to provide an empirical test of a possible solution: it contains an innovation to produce the change in policy or procedure, monitored by social research methods.

Section Outline: Action research as social experiment. Understanding versus changing the world. Applied disciplines: practice skills and social research skills. Example: the Community Development Project. Recent models. Tensions between researching and achievement of change. Problems of control and interpretation in social experiments.

There are two main reasons why people do social research. One is because there is an intellectual challenge: we want to fill a gap in our knowledge, or we believe that currently accepted theories should be tested against new evidence. An alternative reason is that we want to change the world. This second kind of *applied* research may be sponsored by a private organisation (e.g. the managers of the Hawthorne factory, who wanted to improve productivity: see **Hawthorne Effect**) or by public bodies concerned with tackling social problems like crime, health or social exclusion. Action research is one type of applied research that is essentially a social experiment, introducing some new policy and then monitoring its effects.

In the first kind of research, the researcher normally stands back from the subject of the research, taking an objective, detached view (**Positivism and Realism**). The goal is not to change the thing that is being studied, but to *explain* it. The measure of good research is how well it helps us to understand what we are studying. We would not like our research work to be judged solely on how far it changed the world.

So in studying poverty or racism, for example, our task is not to abolish poverty or prevent racism. It is true that researchers often do tackle topics that concern them as citizens. If their research does end up improving the conditions of the poor or the position of minority ethnic groups, then that is welcomed. However, even here, the original motives for the research are also likely to be intellectual questions about the topic.

Some disciplines such as social policy, public health or social work, are more applied in nature. They tend to have more practical concerns than, say, sociology. Their students are trained to engage with the social world and to change it for the better. While these disciplines do carry out a great deal of conventional research in a purely investigative manner, they have also promoted research directly linked to achieving social change: 'action research'.

In early action research, social researchers were teamed up with professional practitioners trying new ways of tackling social problems. The researchers would provide an initial description of social conditions, the practitioners would implement a policy response, and the researchers would then study the resulting change. There would be continued feedback and flow of information between the two, so that new adaptations could be developed. The purpose of the research was to support the intervention, providing the information the practitioners needed. The emphasis was on the

dynamic interaction between the social scientist and the practitioners as part of the ongoing experimental process . . . adaptive rather than controlled, with changes evolving out of increasing awareness and emerging opportunities (Lees 1975: 4–5).

Action research in this view is a kind of social experiment, in which interventions could be tested and successively modified on the basis of what was being achieved (Experiments).

This arrangement recognised two problems. First, most practitioners had not been trained as researchers. They therefore needed help from experts in social research to monitor what was actually happening. Second, those who are sponsoring a change have a vested interest in seeing it succeed. By using independent researchers, there was less chance of any accusation of bias when the success or failure of the intervention came to be evaluated.

One of the most extensive action research projects was Britain's 'Community Development Project' (CDP) in the early 1970s (Home Office 1971). In 12 areas with high levels of social need, 'project' or 'action' teams were to be hired by local authorities to intervene. Research teams based in universities or polytechnics provided the research back-up.

The CDP was not a success. With several governmental institutions involved, there was no agreement on priorities. Staff turn-over weakened continuity of work. The belief that 'experimental action and the "superior vision" of research will somehow identify the magic ingredient' (Smith 1975: 191) led to over-optimistic expectations, and so caused a sense of failure. In some cases the researchers became closely associated with the interventions, and so lost their independent vision. In other cases the action team and the research team fell out (see Payne et al. 1981 for more details).

A more recent model of action research excludes separate social researchers. Modern-day practitioners are more likely to be trained in social research skills, and certainly have better access to research reports and sources that provide advice on how to do research. Their training is also more likely to stress the importance of using evidence – 'evidence-based practice' – than simply following basic training and accepting conventional wisdom. More pragmatically, few projects can afford to employ both practitioners and full-time researchers. Action researchers are now often single workers or at best in very small teams.

This later approach to action research goes some way to avoiding the problem of 'expertise' that we noted the earlier version tried to address. However, it is unrealistic to expect practitioners to be as expert at social research as research specialists (Clarke et al. 2002). The training of practitioners must necessarily concentrate on much more than just social research skills, and after qualification their daily professional routines are unlikely to include much hands-on research activity (see **Community Profiles**). Nor does the merging of research and practice help to solve the second issue noted above, that the credibility of the intervention is enhanced by it being separated from the research monitoring it.

Thus we have a tension between two approaches. 'Pure' research has sometimes been criticised for being 'academic' in the worst sense, i.e. too detached, theoretical, and concerned only with a dialogue between people in universities. Concerned citizens, or professional practitioners dealing directly with social problems like racism, can feel disappointed when researchers stand back from personal involvement in problem-solving. However, such research can claim to bring an independence of judgement. The very lack of involvement is what merits its claim to objective findings (see **Ethical Practice** and **Feminist Research** for an alternative argument).

Critics of action research focus on two issues. First, the research element tends to be subordinated to the intervention. It is not an equal partnership. Indeed, as in the CDP case, researchers and practitioners find it impossible to maintain their relationships, slipping into either conflict or too close an association. When there is only a single action researcher, these tensions are experienced at the personal level. There is always the suspicion that practitioners' career orientations to their professions will outweigh their concerns for reliable social research. Unless anticipated outcomes and definitions of 'success' are defined in advance, and the measurement of them are scrupulously adhered to (Indicators and Operationalisations), the research element will be undermined (Sapsford and Abbott 1992: 101–7). Working in the health field and generally supportive of action interventions, Grbich (1999: 193–214) gives a good account of action research which stresses this need for proper evaluations (Evaluation Studies).

Second, whereas a chemistry experiment in the lab operates with a small number of factors in a controlled environment, social life and therefore social experiments are more complicated. Many more factors are involved and cannot be controlled. It is not logically possible to be sure that events outside of the social experiment have not come into play. In particular, without a comparable separate situation, where there has been no intervention, how are we tell what produced any changes? Just because something happens *after* a policy intervention, it does not mean that it has been *caused* by the intervention. (See Association and Causation on confounding variables.)

Key Words

bias and objectivity 'pure' and 'applied' research social experiment social intervention

Links

Association and Causation Community Profiles Ethical Practice Evaluation Studies Experiments Feminist Research Hawthorne Effect Indicators and Operationalisations Positivism and Realism

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Association and Causation

Association is a connection between two social phenomena, demonstrated by one tending to vary according to variations in the other, whereas causality is a special case of association, when changes in one systematically result in direct changes in the other.

Section Outline: Association and imprecise connections. Example: church-going and age. Association and correlation. Direction of connection: narratives. Spurious relationships. Examples: class and political attitudes; explaining illness. Necessary and sufficient conditions. Causality in quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research provides descriptions of what it studies. Some descriptions connect two social phenomena, making it possible to say that they *tend* to happen together, or rarely happen together, or that when one comes first, the other usually follows. These connections or 'relationships' are referred to as *associations*. A special kind of strong association, which uses one thing to explain why another thing happens, is a causal relationship. Because we want to know why society is like it is (particularly if our philosophical orientation points us towards explanations, see **Positivism and Realism**) a common error is to mistake an association for causation.

A useful starting point is trying to guess something about people in a room. Our accuracy, based on no prior information, would be low. But if we knew something related to what we were guessing about, it would

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help. Rose and Sullivan (1993: 21–31) show how we could improve on our guesses about people's politics by knowing, first, if they own or rent their homes and, second, to which social class they belong.

In social science, connections between social phenomena are generally imprecise. First we need to decide how we will recognise each of the things we are seeking to study (Indicators and Operationalisations). Next, we will have many more associations between them than causal relationships, because the things we study are complex and rarely produced by a single cause. Our research methods are also imperfect, inevitably summarising and simplifying the real world. Even if there are causal relationships to discover, we have difficulty in identifying them.

The most common level of association between two social phenomena or variables is one in which *more, but not all,* cases of the second are found when the first is present. For example, there is an association between age and Christian church attendance in Britain. A higher proportion of older people go to church than do young adults: 28 per cent against 14 per cent (Gill 1999). However, the association between age and church attendance is less than perfect. The most striking thing is that most people of all ages do not attend church. Then, not *every* older person goes to church, while *some* younger people go to church as well. We can say that the probability of an older person being a church-goer is about 3 in 10. This kind of imprecise, 'probabilistic' association is typical of sociological findings.

Our interpretation will be influenced by the empirical data, e.g. the *levels* of church attendance among the elderly, and the extent of the *difference* between them and the church attendance rates of younger people. An initial step in evaluating the evidence of an association is to inspect the data as a contingency table (**Contingency Tables**). We could also use some of the statistical techniques for measuring the strength of associations in standardised ways (e.g. 'correlation'), and whether the apparent connection could have happened by chance (e.g. 'chi-square test'). Correlation is a type of association: to say that there is a correlation between two things does *not* mean that one 'causes' the other. We should also ask whether some third factor might have produced the pattern of association or correlation between the two (Rose and Sullivan 1993); a question of the **Validity** of the findings.

If there is a causal relationship, it must be that 'being elderly' causes 'higher church attendance', rather than church-going making people older. Knowing the *direction* of an association, we can explore the reasons for it. Do elderly people fear death more, predisposing them to need religious comfort? Are older people more isolated, and thus likely to use

the church congregation for company? Are more elderly people churchgoers because they grew up at a time when church attendance was common, and they have retained the habit? These kinds of 'narratives' or 'rationales' can be further explored empirically. Showing correlations, even large numbers of correlations between similar variables, is not enough. We need the narrative or explanatory theory to tell us why we can go beyond a correlational association to talk about a causal relationship (Hage and Foley-Meeker 1988; Blalock 1970: 63–78).

Narratives help to clarify the direction of causality, and prevent silly interpretations. *The Guardian* (3 March 2003) reported that men who do not 'shave daily are 70 per cent more likely to suffer a stroke than those who do'. What narrative could possibly explain this? In fact the study had found that manual workers, and particularly those unmarried and who smoked, shaved less. In other words, those in disadvantaged lower socio-economic positions, and whose diet and lifestyle were unhealthy, tend to be more prone to strokes. Chin stubble is simply a by-product of the true cause.

When an apparent connection between two variables (stubble and strokes) is actually due to a third variable (unhealthy lifestyle) this is called a 'spurious relationship'. Whereas in formal experiments (Experiments), it is easier to manipulate one variable (the 'cause', or 'independent variable') and see what happens to another (the 'effect' or 'dependent variable'), 'cross-sectional' survey and field research simply measures what is happening without being able to make things vary. Unless we have data from repeated studies ('replications') or a longitudinal study (Longitudinal Studies), it is hard to show that one thing happened *before* another; one requirement of demonstrating causality.

However, the fact that an outcome seems to have several associations does not make them automatically spurious. Suppose we were investigating how people's own socio-economic positions affect their opinions about government spending on hospitals and schools. We would find more, but not all, lower social class people favour high spending, but that some in the higher social classes also favour it. Class tends to be *associated* with political attitudes, only in a particular, limited way. We could not claim a strong causal relationship, because we do not have the classic kind of open-and-shut case of causality: if one thing is present (low social class), then always and only is the other thing present (favours government spending).

Our finding that the class/attitude causal relationship is weak should not be surprising. Other factors influence attitudes, like a person's gender or membership of an ethnic group. Education, age, health, family circumstances (young children) and employment (in the public or private sector) are also plausible sources of attitude influences. For example, teachers and nurses (not members of the lower classes), aged in their 30s (the child-rearing phase of life) are strong advocates of higher government expenditure. Teachers and nurses are predominantly female occupations: is their support for government spending more a product of their gender, or due more to their employment and family circumstances?

Another problem, equally typical of sociological explanation, is the distribution of illness and early death. Explanations include social inequalities in life experience and access to health services; low socio-economic position of parents (impacting through pregnancy and childhood); genetic predispositions to certain illnesses; adult lifestyle (smoking, alcohol and diet); type of employment; and education (knowledge about symptoms and treatments) (Payne and Payne 2000). All of these predispose people to ill health, but it makes a great difference for social policy where the emphasis is placed. Sapsford's discussion (1999: 27–33) of the antecedents and consequences of women's drinking in research by Wilsnack and others gives a concrete sociological example of cause and effect in health research. Evidence-based practice makes causality of more than just academic interest.

Some causes or 'prior conditions' are said to be 'necessary': the outcome cannot happen without them, but the outcome does not *always* happen because other factors also have to be present. Other conditions are 'sufficient': if they are present, the outcome happens *regardless* of other factors. However, the outcome might still happen without the prior condition. To establish causality, one needs both 'necessary and sufficient' rules to apply. It is often difficult to establish this, or to tell which 'causes' are the stronger. Wickham-Crowley's work (1992) on Latin American guerrilla movements and revolutions demonstrates how events are connected, but that the connections are complex and multiplex. Multivariate analysis is one group of statistical methods for showing how sets of variables interact in their effects on a dependent variable.

In designing research, it is good practice to consider all the factors that one's prior theoretical model suggests might be associated with the outcome. Of course, not everything can be included: we often end up with a rather simple set of associated factors. As a result, sociologists commonly play safe, using the term 'association' rather than 'cause'. The problem of causality is particularly important in quantitative research, with its aim of identifying and explaining social regularities (Quantitative Methods and Qualitative Methods). It is less pressing in those kinds of qualitative research which seek only to interpret context-specific meanings.

Key Words

causal diretion correlation cross-sectional dependent variable independent variable

narrative necessary and sufficient rationale spurious

Links

Contingency Tables Experiments Indicators and, Operationalisations Longitudinal studies and cross-sectional studies Positivism and Realism Qualitative Methods Quantitative Methods Validity

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Attitude Scales

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Attitude scales provide a quantitative measurement of attitudes, opinions or values by summarising numerical scores given by researchers to people's responses to sets of statements exploring dimensions of an underlying theme. **Section Outline:** Tapping meanings in quantitative research. Agreement and disagreement with statements. Example: Islamic religiosity. Objective meanings. Scale characteristics. Piloting for uni-dimensionality, presentation and layout. Scales: Likert; Thurstone; Bogardus; Guttman; Semantic Differential. Advantages and disadvantages of scales.

Although quantitative research is often said to be less interested in the *meanings* that people attach to their actions, many surveys do in fact enquire into this area. Market research in particular asks about *evaluations* of products and services. The main survey method used to tap meanings is attitude scaling.

'Attitude scales' (or 'indexes' or 'ratings': see Schutt 1999: 75–81; Hoinville et al. 1982: 33–37 for examples of construction) consist of asking informants to respond to a statement (or a question) in terms of a fixed range of levels. For example, a study of religiosity, citizens' rights, and gender among Islamic groups sought levels of agreement or disagreement with statements like:

- Islam does not separate politics and religion.
- All Muslims must work together to face the Western challenge against Islam.
- Families should insist that women wear veils.
- Western clothing is more practical than traditional clothing.

Each statement was linked to an issue, like religiosity, women's political rights, or 'traditionalism' forming a set of attitudes (Rizzo et al. 2002: 651).

The characteristic difference between this and qualitative research is that the categories are more obviously determined by the researcher than by the informants. 'Meanings' are explored in an objective framework set externally by the research. In contrast, subjective meanings are believed to emerge from the informants' lengthy and detailed communication with the qualitative researcher (Qualitative Methods; Quantitative Methods).

The logic behind attitude scales, drawing on social psychology, is that people are assumed to discriminate systematically in their views (Eysenck 1953). Responding to suitable statements enables respondents to express their views. Their discriminations form a continuum from positive to negative orientations to the statements. Combinations of their discriminations can be brought together in a way that reflects underlying attitudes, which relate to other sociological variables.