

# SOCIOLOGICAL **RESEARCH METHODS** IN CONTEXT

fiona devine & sue heath



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© Fiona Devine and Sue Heath 1999

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*To our past and present students  
at the Universities of  
Liverpool, Manchester and Southampton*

# Contents

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<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
2 Education: Mac An Ghaill's <i>The Making of Men</i>	20
3 The Family: Finch and Mason's <i>Negotiating Family Responsibilities</i>	41
4 Work: Phizacklea and Wolkowitz's <i>Homeworking Women</i>	63
5 Housing: Saunders' <i>A Nation of Home Owners</i>	84
6 Health: Wellings and colleagues' <i>Sexual Behaviour in Britain</i>	107
7 Crime: Hobbs' <i>Doing the Business</i>	129
8 Class: Gregson and Lowe's <i>Servicing the Middle Classes</i>	149
9 Politics: Roseneil's <i>Disarming Patriarchy</i>	175
10 Conclusion	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	226

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# List of Tables

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4.1	Distribution of clerical and manual homeworkers' hourly earnings (Coventry sample)	69
4.2	<i>Prima</i> homeworker occupations	70
4.3	Annual household income of <i>Prima</i> homeworkers compared to <i>Prima</i> readership and (BMRB) UK population estimates	77
5.1	Response rates by town and type of area sampled	97
5.2	Capital gains and annual gains by home owners in the three towns survey	98
5.3	The meaning of home for owners and tenants	102
6.1	Reported incidence of homosexual and heterosexual attraction and experience	122
8.1	Recorded and estimated advertised demand for waged domestic labour in Britain: July 1981–91	154
8.2	Labour force characteristics of cleaners	156
8.3	Labour force characteristics of nannies	159
8.4	Incidence of employment of categories of waged domestic labour in case study areas	168

# List of Figures

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1.1	Methods used in the eight case studies	4
3.1	Example of a short vignette	45
3.2	'Jane and Ann Hill' vignette	50
5.1	The three towns survey study areas	94
6.1	Calculation of final response rate to the National Survey	113
7.1	The East End of London	136
7.2	An entrepreneurial scale	137
8.1	Advertised demand for nannies in the North East, 1981–91	155
9.1	'At the Peace Camp, Newbury, Berkshire' (to the tune of 'English Country Garden')	188



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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The purpose of this book is to discuss issues of method within the context of current empirical research. It focuses on how the choice and use of particular methods and techniques shape the substantive findings of such research. This is achieved by way of a critical evaluation of eight pieces of recent research in core areas of the discipline of sociology: education, family, employment, housing, health, crime, class and political activism. All published in the last decade, the studies capture some of the most important economic, social and political changes in Britain in the last 50 years or more. They typify the long tradition of empirical research in British sociology on which the high reputation of the discipline is based. The book is especially concerned with the real life problems of doing social research, including the compromises which sometimes occur, the constraints which are not easily surmounted as well as the initial hunches which are undermined, and the surprises which emerge out of the process of research. Practical issues, therefore, loom large in the discussion of the key texts, but that is not to say that the focus is prosaic or mundane. Rather, a consideration of real life research inevitably raises wider issues to do with the ethics of conducting research, as well as political issues which underpin the choice of method and how research actually gets done.

Practical, ethical, political and epistemological issues were similarly the central concern of Colin Bell and Howard Newby's ground-breaking book, *Doing Sociological Research*, which was first published in 1977. They broke away from the tradition of prescriptive methods books which told students how research should be undertaken in an abstract, albeit straightforward, way. Their text was descriptive in focusing on how research has been done in real life by way of seven

personal accounts of doing sociological research. The contributors offered autobiographical accounts which reflected on the initial motives for their research, how it was conducted, its consequences and the subsequent use of the substantive findings. They emphasised that research is rarely straightforward, that it is often beset by false starts, initiated with badly thought-out ideas, sometimes compromised by the personal difficulties of working with others, constrained by time and money, and so on. Bell and Newby's approach to these themes generated a much more reflexive consideration of issues of method, and their influence today is most obvious in other autobiographical collections on the research process (see, for example, Bell and Roberts 1984; Hobbs and May 1993; Roberts 1981; Stanley 1990).

Arguably, the influence of Bell and Newby's book is wider still in the plethora of methods books which is increasingly student friendly. Accessibility has been achieved by discussing the plurality of methods available to researchers, including both quantitative and qualitative research methods and techniques (Bryman 1988; Brannen 1992; Mason 1996; Silverman 1997). It has also been achieved by drawing more on real life research as a way of presenting issues of method (Gilbert 1993; Hammersley 1992; O'Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). Far more attention, therefore, has been devoted to understanding, interpreting and explaining the process of doing social research than was the case in the past. There has been a tendency, however, to draw on short abstracts from empirical research with the result that the practical, ethical and political issues of doing research have not always been discussed fully. Students, for example, have been unable to see how the choice of methods – the means by which the research actually gets done – shapes the substantive findings which emerge. More important, there has been a tendency to draw on classic, yet outdated, examples of empirical research, such as Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* which was first published over twenty years ago (Willis 1977). Of course, drawing on such studies has many virtues. The unintended consequence, however, is that more recent empirical research has been ignored. That is to say, the kinds of social issues and substantive topics which are most likely to generate interest and enthusiasm among current generations of students tend not to be drawn upon for a discussion of research methods.

Against such a background, this book is written for students by focusing on some of the most recent empirical research. In doing so, it addresses issues which are relevant to all our daily lives and are also,

therefore, engaging. We hope that the grounded discussion of the topics under investigation encourages students to address issues of method as well. Each of the chapters asks probing questions about how the research was done, whether the choice of methods was appropriate, what setbacks were experienced and how they were overcome and, finally, whether the substantive results were valid and reliable. In doing so explicitly, we hope to encourage students to put aside their initial fears about asking such questions of published research and thus assist them in acquiring the skills and confidence to critically evaluate empirical research for themselves. From this vantage point, students should then be in a stronger position to engage in empirical research of their own, with a realistic awareness that the research process is usually far from straightforward. The challenge is to confront the mundane *messiness* of empirical research by addressing the practical, ethical and epistemological issues which present themselves during the research process. Of course, it is always much easier to cast a critical eye over someone else's research. The empirical studies in this book have been subject to unusually close scrutiny, about which their authors have been most gracious. We might add that, influenced partly by the legacy of Bell and Newby (1977), the authors upon whose work we focus have made our project easier by being more open about their research than previous generations of sociologists perhaps tended to be. We are firmly of the belief, however, that evaluating the empirical work of others is an important first step before embarking on research of one's own. It is for this reason that it is so crucial that issues of method are discussed in the context of recent empirical research.

## The choice of studies

Our choice of studies was governed by several criteria. First, we sought to include first-class research which, at the time of writing, had been published in book form in the last ten years. Consequently, all of the work considered has appeared since 1988, and the books should be readily available on library bookshelves. Second, we wanted to embrace research which covered the main sub-disciplines of sociology and addressed important parts of people's daily lives. While we did not specifically choose studies on gender or race, these issues – along with class divisions – were often integral to our chapters and

reflect the importance of social stratification in British sociology. Third, it was important to discuss a variety of different research methods and techniques. Interestingly, all of the studies in this book employed a variety of methods, with many drawing on a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques (see Figure 1.1). The studies, therefore, highlight the virtues of methodological eclecticism – a theme which is considered further in Chapter 10. They also show that the debate about the virtues of quantitative versus qualitative data can become rather sterile (Bryman 1988; Brannen 1992) and that the more immediate practical challenge is to bring together the results of different methods and techniques. Fourth, and finally, we concentrated on books where there was an explicit discussion of how the research was done, what the pitfalls had been and how they were circumvented. Indeed, many of the authors of the studies under investigation have reflected on their research methods in separate publications and we also drew on this material where appropriate. The authors of the studies, in other words, have been themselves reflexive about how they did their research. In sum, we would venture to suggest that the studies evaluated in this book are examples of *good practice* in social research.

Author	Title of study	Methods
Maírtín Mac an Ghaill	<i>The Making of Men</i>	Observation, interviewing, case studies, diaries, surveys
Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason	<i>Negotiating Family Responsibilities</i>	Local survey, in-depth interviews
Annie Phizacklea and Carol Wolkowicz	<i>Homeworking Women</i>	National survey, in-depth interviews, case studies
Peter Saunders	<i>A Nation of Home Owners</i>	Local surveys including open-ended questions
Kaye Wellings et al.	<i>Sexual Behaviour in Britain</i>	National survey
Dick Hobbs	<i>Doing the Business</i>	Observation, in-depth interviews
Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe	<i>Servicing the Middle Classes</i>	Content analysis, local surveys, in-depth interviews
Sasha Roseneil	<i>Disarming Patriarchy</i>	Observation, interviews, documentary analysis

**Figure 1.1** Methods used in the eight case studies

The structure of each chapter is the same. After a short introduction to the study under the spotlight, the research is located in the context of recent debates in its particular sub-discipline. This review of the literature shows how the research was shaped by previous work, how it might offer a new contribution to the topic in question and how the aims and objectives of the research were developed. In some cases, it will be seen that methods employed by other researchers influenced how the research in question was undertaken. The main substantive findings of the research are then summarised so that they are known to the reader before the critical evaluation of the study begins. This not only serves to illustrate the link between the conduct of a study and the type of results subsequently presented, but also firmly locates the issues of method raised by each study in the context of their empirical grounding. The most important component of each chapter, however, is the critical evaluation of how the research was undertaken. This task is achieved through an exploration of two or three issues of method in each chapter, although reference is also made to methodological issues raised in other chapters. It should be said that all of the authors commented on our assessment of their work. They sometimes disputed aspects of our evaluation and if, in our view, a convincing case was made then we amended the chapters accordingly. More often than not, however, the authors provided additional comments on the points we made and acknowledged the issues raised. A final overview of the methods and findings of the research is provided in each chapter's conclusion. Finally, additional readings are provided at the end to facilitate further exploration of both the substantive topics and issues of method discussed.

Inevitably, our choice of books influenced the range and nature of issues of method we address in this book. In highlighting the messiness of much sociological research – of how research rarely proceeds through its various stages without some setbacks, constraints, complications, detours and so forth – three issues emerged on numerous occasions across the chapters. First, despite the increasingly reflexive nature of much sociological practice, the vexed problems of politics and bias surfaced especially in Máirtín Mac an Ghaill's ethnographic study of masculinities in a state comprehensive school, Dick Hobbs' participant observation of petty criminals and local CID detectives in the East End of London and Sasha Roseneil's case study of the experiences of women at the Greenham Common peace camp of the 1980s. Second, methods of sampling (especially

minority populations for whom there are no sampling frames) and their implications for the generalisability of findings emerged most notably in Annie Phizacklea and Carol Wolkowitz's national survey of homeworking women (1995), Peter Saunders' three towns survey of home ownership (1990) and Kaye Wellings and her colleagues' national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles (1994). Third, while the virtues of mixing methods have long been emphasised, the challenge of making sense of different findings arose in Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason's study of family obligations (based on a random sample and in-depth interviews) (1993) and Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe's research on the use of waged domestic labour in dual career families (derived from an analysis of advertisements in *The Lady*, case studies in the North East and South East of Britain and in-depth interviews) (1994). Furthermore, the emphasis on the untidiness of much sociological research raises another issue to do with the scientific claims of sociology. That is to say, if sociological research rarely proceeds in an uncomplicated fashion, can it be regarded as a scientific practice? Is sociology a rigorous social science? How might it be rigorous? These issues are now considered more fully with reference to the case studies discussed in detail in each chapter.

## **Politics, bias and field relations**

The case studies in this book illustrate that the problem of bias can take numerous forms, in that both funders' and researchers' views can influence the conduct of research – and even whether it proceeds at all. Wellings and her colleagues (1994) encountered such difficulties. In the context of a moral panic about AIDS, their survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles was halted at a late stage by government intervention at the highest level and only rescued by the intervention of the Wellcome Trust. In his study of home ownership in Britain, Saunders' (1990) prior commitment to the benefits of home ownership, individualism and private property (as his attitudes have shifted to the right of the party political spectrum) was an important influence on his decision to place less emphasis than other sociologists in the field on class differences in the accumulation of wealth in the housing market. These examples of bias, of course, raise the issue of the politics of research and how sociological research is influenced by the political context in which it is undertaken (Bell and Newby



1977; Bell and Roberts 1984). However, there are less obvious ways in which bias and politics can influence the process and output of research. A researcher's personal biography, their prior commitment to particular beliefs and values and the nature of field relations – whether they are close or distant to the people involved (Pearson 1993) – can influence the choice of research topic, the means of information gathering and the presentation of substantive findings. It is now widely agreed that such 'effects' are integral to social science research and they cannot be eliminated in the search for an objective social science. That said, there is a growing commitment to reflexivity whereby researchers are aware of, reflect on and are explicit about the ways in which different forms of bias affect their research (see, for example, Hobbs and May 1993). Of course, reflexivity does not mean that the issue of bias and the politics of research are no longer problematic. It does make it easier, however, to consider the implications of these issues on how the research was conducted and the substantive findings that emerged.

Issues of bias and the politics of research are most apparent in the work of Mac an Ghaill, Hobbs and Roseneil. Mac an Ghaill's book, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling* (1994) is based on an ethnography of life at 'Parnell School'. As a sociologist of education, Mac an Ghaill's work is at the cutting edge of current debates concerning the construction of masculinities in the context of schooling. Specifically, his research raises questions about 'taking sides' and the legitimacy of 'standpoint' epistemologies, including whether involvement in research can be seen as a form of empowerment. Mac an Ghaill's loyalties and political allegiances are self-evident in his book and there is no mistaking his political commitment to excluded and marginalised young adults. Such an explicit political commitment is not without its problems, however, and can lead to some selectivity in the use of data, a problem which is evident to some degree in Mac an Ghaill's work. There are also difficulties associated with according greater validity to the accounts of oppressed individuals over others, an issue which Mac an Ghaill has acknowledged in more recent reflections on his research (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1998). Moreover, 'empowerment' (however defined) and 'giving a voice' are not necessarily synonymous. Identifying with a powerless group can lead to a simplistic polarisation between 'goodies' and 'baddies', when in reality all groups may deserve some sympathy, albeit for different reasons.

Questions of bias and politics in relation to personal biographies and field relations loom large in the discussion of Hobbs' *Doing the Business* (1988), an ethnographic study of petty criminals and local CID detectives in the East End of London. Hobbs' central argument is that a unique working-class culture – which celebrates entrepreneurship – shapes the activities of both the policed and the police in the locality. These issues are contextualised within a social history of the development of the British police and an economic history of the East End from which the culture of the locality emerged. The ethnographic research consisted of both overt and covert participant observation of the policed (criminals) and the police (non-uniformed CID) in a variety of different settings, including local pubs and clubs. Hobbs grew up in the East End and he is certainly honest about his partial insider status. That is not to say, however, that his position was unproblematic. It is arguable that Hobbs proffers a less critical account of malpractice within the Metropolitan CID than might have been the case if a non-local had researched the same topic, while his reliance on informal access to the CID, together with the nature of his relations with a small number of detectives, may well have provided him with only a partial picture of police malpractice. Hobbs' corroboration of material derived from his various drinking sessions with material from other sources could, for example, have been discussed explicitly. Further, his personal closeness to a group of local criminals leads him to paint a relatively benign view of their activities, while he also makes light of the ethics of his own involvement in criminal behaviour and of the likely consequences if he had been caught by the police. Yet it is hard not to conclude that only a cockney-turned-academic could have written such an interesting account of the East End: that Hobbs was part of the world he studied undoubtedly contributed to the richness of his ethnography.

Issues of biography, prior commitments, and loyalties to research participants appear, albeit in a different fashion, in Roseneil's *Disarming Patriarchy* (1995). Her book is a fascinating chronicle of the experiences of women involved in the Greenham Common peace camp during the 1980s, and it describes an important moment in the history of the women's movement in Britain. It is as much based on Roseneil's own memories as it is on those of the 35 women she interviewed in depth as part of her study, as she herself joined the camp as an 18 year old, having abandoned her 'A' level studies in order to do so. Roseneil's research is based on what she calls 'retrospective

auto-ethnography', an approach whereby she subjected her own personal experiences, alongside those of other Greenham women, to the rigours of a variety of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. A term like 'dislocated ethnography' might be more accurate, better capturing the varying degrees of overlap, both in time and space, between Roseneil's experiences and those of the women involved in her research. Her commitment to feminist methodology also raises questions of prior loyalty and self-censorship within the research process. Roseneil's feminism leads to an incontrovertible alignment with Greenham women, but it also means, somewhat disappointingly, that she is rather obscure about some aspects of intra-camp rivalries. Finally, although she claims to 'tell it like it is', Roseneil is rather more open about tensions and conflicts between the majority of Greenham women who shared a broadly pro-feminist position than she is about conflicts between such women and the small minority of women who, despite being active participants in the peace camp, were nonetheless hostile to the feminist politics of Greenham.

Overall, these three studies illustrate the inherently political nature of sociological research: it invariably serves certain interests over others. In this respect, then, all research has a political dimension. The work of Mac an Ghaill, Hobbs and Roseneil also raises questions of value freedom in sociology. Can sociological research be value free? Is it important, or necessary, for researchers to declare their own values or standpoint? Should researchers prioritise some people's accounts over others? Does giving a voice to people involved in research empower them? If so, in what sense is this so? It is now more commonplace for researchers to consider the impact of political and other potential sources of bias on the conduct of their research, as well as to weave these issues into research reports. Without doubt, this is a favourable development in sociology. It reminds us, for example, of the dilemmas surrounding the ongoing maintenance of good relations with contacts in order to facilitate the collection of further information from them. It is apparent, however, that reflexivity does not *solve* the issue of bias in sociological research, although it does have two major advantages. First, it enhances the researcher's awareness of the likely impact of politics and issues of bias on their research. Second, it forces all of us – both as researchers and as consumers of research – to think about the implications of such bias for the substantive findings and the conclusions which can be drawn from them. We would venture to suggest that greater attention could

still be paid to the second advantage, if the knock-on effects of such issues are to be fully acknowledged. The sociological enterprise would be all the more robust for this move.

## **Sampling techniques and generalisability**

A broad range of sampling techniques are employed in the studies discussed in this book. Sampling refers to 'the selection of people, places or activities suitable for study' (Lee 1993: 60). Various sampling techniques are used in both quantitative and qualitative research. An important distinction exists between *probability* sampling and *non-probability* sampling. In the case of the former, the chances of inclusion in a sample are either equal or, if not equal, calculable; in the case of the latter, it is impossible to estimate the probability of inclusion. Within the quantitative research tradition, methods of sampling and the effective use of different sampling frames – pre-existing lists from which one can select a sample, such as membership lists or registers of various kinds – crucially affects two key issues. These are the *representativeness* of the sample (the degree to which the sample accurately reflects the characteristics of the broader population, whether that population consists of all British citizens, all ferret owners, or all flower pot factories) and the *generalisability* of the research findings (the degree to which one can say with confidence that the findings from one setting are likely to apply to similar settings). The use of an inadequate sampling frame could place a question mark over both the representativeness and generalisability of research findings if the membership of the population it lists is not exhaustive. An obvious example is related to the much discussed inadequacies of the electoral register as an effective sampling frame; not all household members are registered to vote, with a particular tendency for younger and more geographically mobile individuals to be omitted.

In comparison, qualitative research does not seek to be either representative or generalisable in quite the same manner as quantitative research, or at all. However, this is not to suggest that the choice of sampling methods or the use of sampling frames are any less important than in quantitative research. Finch and Mason's research on family support and help (which is discussed more fully in the next section) offers an excellent discussion of the theoretical sampling

strategy (sometimes referred to as purposive sampling) which they employed within the qualitative part of their research. They did not automatically draw a sub-sample of respondents from their main sample. Rather, they drew on just some of their respondents and their kin in order to focus quite selectively on the social groups most likely to have been involved in the (re)negotiation of family relationships and responsibilities (namely, young people in the 18–24-year-old age group and people who had been divorced and/or remarried). Finch and Mason's work illustrates that methods of sampling should be as systematic and rigorous as strategies associated with quantitative sampling techniques. A failure to justify one's sampling strategies in any research, therefore, only undermines the strength of the claims that can be made about the data.

Issues of sampling and generalisability also arise in Saunders' book, *A Nation of Home Owners* (1990). Saunders considers the phenomenal growth of home ownership in Britain this century and its consequences for people's daily lives – be they home owners or council tenants – and its wider impact on the character of British society. A wide array of secondary sources, including government statistics and other academic and non-academic surveys, are used by Saunders. His principal method of enquiry, however, involved local surveys of 450 households in three working-class towns: Burnley, Derby and Slough. Saunders' decision to undertake a set of three surveys rather than a nationally representative survey is worthy of note, not least because he does not fully explore the local dimension of his surveys except in relation to capital gains. He effectively uses them as if they constituted a nationally representative survey and he often generalises from his empirical findings in three towns to British society as a whole. However, his sample size is relatively small: arguably *too* small – particularly for drawing out differences between groups or categories of respondents – to make generalisations. Moreover, his response rate, especially on the council estates in Slough, was disappointing. Consequently, it may be that Saunders generated a sample of respondents who were very positive about their experiences of home ownership by virtue of the fact that those with less positive views declined to be interviewed. The low response rate, therefore, raises some doubts about the representativeness and generalisability of his findings. It should of course be stressed that this problem is not peculiar to Saunders' research, in that all random sample surveys which achieve less than 100 percent response rate are likely to be problematic in this respect.

Sampling issues, especially the difficulties of sampling minority populations, also arise in Phizacklea and Wolkowitz's *Homeworking Women* which was published in 1995. Homeworking – paid work at home – is one way in which women combine employment with child-care and domestic commitments and is especially prevalent among ethnic minority women. That said, Phizacklea and Wolkowitz wanted to look at all types of homework undertaken by different groups of women. In order to capture this diversity, they employed a variety of research methods including a postal questionnaire included in the women's magazine *Prima*, in-depth interviews with white and Asian women homeworkers in Coventry, and a series of case studies of organisations which had developed teleworking schemes. Their use of a readership of a women's magazine for a postal questionnaire elicited a limited response from a highly select group of women derived from an already skewed group of readers, while they also encountered considerable difficulties in generating a sample of homeworkers for their in-depth study. An initial attempt to contact homeworkers via adverts in the local press met with limited success, especially with regard to Asian women homeworkers. A second strategy of contacting them through community workers proved somewhat more successful in generating a sample of white women in a range of non-manual and manual occupations and a smaller number of Asian women homeworkers, all in manual occupations. It was nonetheless disappointing that they achieved only a small sample of Asian women homeworkers based only in manual occupations. Their research therefore highlights the considerable difficulties of generating a sample from a relatively small and hidden workforce. That said, their intensive case study research powerfully captures the diverse experiences of working-class Asian women homeworkers performing low-skilled tasks for which they were paid very little, as against the experiences of white middle-class women teleworkers undertaking high-skilled work for which they were well remunerated.

Finally, the difficulties of gaining access to a hidden population which arise in a large, national sample survey can be seen in the discussion of Wellings *et al.*'s study, *Sexual Behaviour in Britain: The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* (1994). Against the background of the emergence of the human immune deficiency virus (HIV) epidemic, the rationale for the study was the need to gather information that might help to assess and prevent its future spread.

Wellings' research team noted that previous studies had focused on high-risk groups and had been based on clinic and volunteer samples, resulting in a lack of knowledge concerning the sexual attitudes and behaviours of the broader population. It was crucial, therefore, to find out whether or not people from high-risk groups differed significantly from the wider population. A lot of attention was given to the development of sensitive questions within the survey, with broad acknowledgement of the likely difficulties arising from differently understood definitions of commonly used phrases and terminology. As others have noted, however, respondents were given positive encouragement to 'admit' to heterosexual behaviour, yet were given slightly less positive encouragement to speak of homosexual practices. More importantly, disputes about the findings concerning the incidence of homosexual practice in Britain raised issues relating to the survey's representativeness. Arguably, difficulties in locating the 'hidden population' of actively gay men and lesbians led to an underestimation of the incidence of homosexual behaviour. Again, therefore, the reliability of some of the key findings has been called into question by some critics.

As the studies in this book demonstrate, gaining access to a group of people – especially a hidden population – is no simple matter. The choice of sampling procedures and sampling frames, therefore, has major consequences for the status of one's research findings. It should also be noted that issues of sampling are not simply confined to the early stages of a piece of research and easily forgotten once completed. On the contrary, sampling issues are integral to the entire research process, especially for projects using the mixed method approach, which will inevitably require different sampling methods and frames for different components of the research at various times over the duration of the project. Indeed, issues of sampling within qualitative research are often ongoing, particularly if strategies such as snowballing are used (a strategy whereby successfully located respondents are asked if they know of other similarly placed individuals who might be interested in being involved in the research). Most importantly, the studies in this book demonstrate that choices about sampling techniques and sampling frames require careful deliberation. The decision-making process has to be systematic and rigorous and not arbitrary and idiosyncratic. We would argue that this simple point applies with equal force to quantitative and qualitative research and that these issues should be discussed explicitly in all research

reports. To date, however, quantitative researchers have tended to be much better than qualitative researchers at discussing sampling issues. We hope this situation will be rectified in the future since a full justification of sampling strategies can only enhance the strength of the claims that can be made about the material collected. In turn, the reliability of the research findings – whether similar results would be produced if the research was replicated by other researchers – would also be improved.

### **The challenges of mixing methods**

While a mixed approach was not one of the original criteria on which the studies discussed in this book were chosen, all of the researchers employed a variety of methods, often drawing on a mix of both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Contrary to Bell and Roberts' earlier conclusion (Bell and Roberts 1984: 5), both sociology as a discipline and individual sociologists as practitioners have now become increasingly pluralistic. It has become commonplace to reject the old debate about the relative advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative research, and instead the virtues of combining methods are widely applauded (Bryman 1988; Brannen 1992). We would not dissent from this consensus although we are also of the opinion that some of the difficulties of employing a range of methods are often neglected. Epistemological issues still loom large – as will be discussed in Chapter 10 – and practical problems persist. It cannot be assumed, for example, that an expert in the field of survey research is also equally proficient in ethnography, and vice versa. Moreover, proper attention has yet to be devoted to making sense of some of the contradictory findings that frequently emerge from different methods and techniques. It is easy enough to select snippets from qualitative interviews to 'flesh out' the data from quantitative research. A more important issue arises, however, when qualitative material does *not* confirm or even *challenges* quantitative findings (and vice versa). Should one or other data source be conveniently discarded? How does a researcher try to reconcile contradictory findings? What criteria should be applied? Some of these issues are yet to be fully addressed in the welcome although not totally unproblematic shift towards methodological eclecticism.