2 Before you start…

As we saw in the last section, careful planning is the key to successful research. Even before you start the planning process, there are two ways to make your research valued and competent.

First, an understanding of some key research theory and concepts will help you. In this section we aim to explain these as simply as we can, and to use as little 'jargon' as possible. We will define essential technical terms. Second, there are some broader considerations – the ethics of research and how it is carried out, especially in a community setting. This means thinking about issues such as participation, confidentiality and equal opportunities.

a Research theory

Understanding basic research theory will

- **enable you to design your research**
- **give you a better understanding and make you more aware of your own perspectives and values which you will inevitably bring to your research**
- **give you a better understanding and ability to critique any research reports you need to read for your research i.e. what is already known about your subject.**

Here we cover the principles that underpin research by defining and explaining some common research terms:

- **quantitative and qualitative research**
- **strategic approaches**
- **reliability and validity**
- **triangulation**

Though these terms may seem daunting, we lead you step by step through them.

There are several different approaches to doing social research. Choosing an appropriate method for your research is not just a practical issue, it is also a question of how we make sense of our situation or the world around us and the most appropriate way in which to study it. At this point we need to introduce the two overarching approaches, quantitative and qualitative research.

Quantitative and qualitative research
Research is generally referred to as quantitative or qualitative, indicating different kinds of information which are collected.

Quantitative research collects data that can be aggregated (added up) and used to generalise to the wider population being studied. It is concerned with collecting data and measuring it numerically. It is associated with:

- **large-scale studies**
- **evidence about the relationship between local issues and their wider context. For example '50% of children on this estate experience poor health as opposed to a national figure of 30%.'**

Qualitative research seeks to gather data that is non-numeric. It provides depth and is associated with:

- **small-scale studies**
- **understanding or explaining issues**
- **description and richness in detail**
- **information about attitudes, views and feelings**
- **looking at things in context, stressing relationships and interdependencies**

For many years, there was debate about which kind of research, quantitative or qualitative, produced 'truth'. Now it is recognised that both kinds of information are useful. It depends on what you want to find out, as well as the budget for your research project, and how much time you have.

Strategic approaches

First we need to consider the overall strategy that will be used and the different methods that will fit into it. Various research methods, such as interviews or questionnaires, can be used for each of them. Some methods are more appropriate than others but there are no specific rules saying which method is best suited to each approach. What is crucial is making sure that you are using the methods that best help you find out what you need to know, within the limits of your time and budget. Three strategic approaches particularly relevant for community groups are:

- **surveys**
- **case studies**
- **action research**

Surveys

'To survey' can mean 'to view comprehensively and in detail.' Implicit in the notion of a survey is that it is broad in its scope. Surveys generally relate to the present state of affairs and may be updated, like the census, which is conducted every 10 years. The census is an example of a survey that aims to cover 100% of the population. Most surveys are less ambitious than this, using sampling techniques to identify a smaller group for study and then generalising their results to the broader group. Note that a survey is not a method but a research strategy, which can make use of a variety of methods such as interviews, questionnaires and observation.

Example

A Federation of Community Centres was researching the ways community centres in the area met the needs of under-3s and their carers. They interviewed carers, both in existing groups and not attending any groups. A particular emphasis was put on seeking the views of lone parents, minority groups and those on low incomes. The survey covered what it is like bringing up toddlers in the borough, what support structures people use and what groups, services and environmental changes would improve their quality of life.

Case studies

The term 'case study' is used in many different contexts, but here we use case studies to mean a strategy for research, focusing on one particular or specific case in context. They lend themselves to exploring situations that can be typical, extreme, available, interesting or unique.

Case studies are a spotlight on one instance, one person, one area or one organisation. The case study is the opposite of a survey; it is not a mass study and does not seek breadth, but depth. The idea is to use more than one method to collect data relating to the case study.

Example

Moving Pictures

This research project carried out detailed case study research with eight organisations. It identified eight dilemmas of voluntary action and explored how these are experienced and managed in particular organisations. Issues covered include the role of volunteers, strategic planning and partnership working.

Your organisation may choose to focus upon a particular neighbourhood as a case study. For example it may be unique in having a community-led initiative that has reduced crime to extremely low levels. Or you may want to study a youth group that has developed interesting ways of working with young people around parenting. You may take a small community organisation as a case study because it is typical of small organisations and explore location, development and changes, social context and organisational type in order to draw out what makes it work and key issues.

Action research

The purpose of action research is to improve practice. It is well suited to those conducting research in their workplace or on a specific project, as it feeds findings in to the project. The researcher or practitioner, usually in consultation with the group they are working with:

- **identifies a problem**
- **thinks of practical solutions to solve that problem**
- **implements these solutions**
- **collects data on any changes that take place as a result of this implementation.**

More issues are then identified, as well as effective change, and more solutions are thought up or confirmed. This process of research is an ongoing one, using a systematic approach for the definition, solution and evaluation of problems, issues and concerns. It helps generate a local solution to local problems.

Example

A food project in Leicester used an action research approach in its work with local people to achieve its aims of improving eating behaviours and raising awareness of healthy eating. By carefully evaluating a variety of activities the project was able to identify the factors which encouraged or discouraged participation and which led to small but sustainable changes in their attitudes to food, nutrition and cooking. These were incorporated into the project as it developed.

Reliability and validity

In a research context, the terms 'reliability' and 'validity' have specific meanings. Understanding these can help you with your research design.

Reliability means that the data collection methods you use do not have an undue influence on the results you obtain.

Your findings would be similar to someone else's if they were to repeat your research. For example, if someone was asked to complete the same questionnaire twice, they should generally give the same answers. If they don't it may mean that the questions are ambiguous and open to different interpretations. Piloting – trying out your research with a small group of people as a practice run – is crucial to ensure that the information you collect is reliable.

Where there are several researchers gathering information it is important that they have a shared understanding of how they will collect data.

Validity refers to the notion that the information you gather actually is about the topic in question. This might seem a fairly simple thing to deal with but is actually a fairly complex process. For example, in an interview, the respondent may give the replies that they think the interviewer wants to hear, or they may not want to say things that are critical of others, or they may just go off the point. If this happens, we could say that the data collected is not valid; it is not relevant to the topic (though it may be worth exploring at a later stage). The internal validity of the research is questionable.

Research will also be seen as invalid if the people who take part in it are not representative. We explain how to make sure you have a representative cross-section on page 21, *[section 3d* 'Who to talk to'.*]*

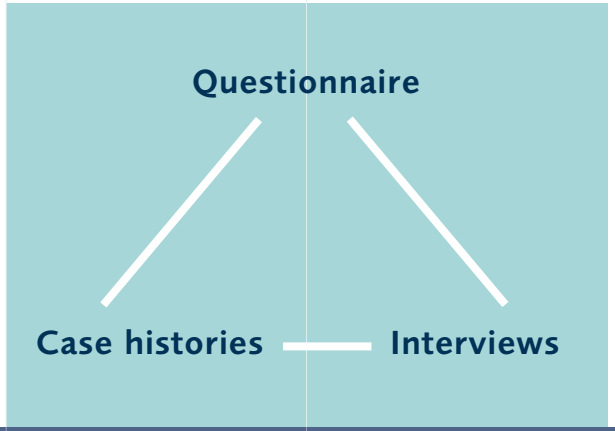
One way of dealing with this is to use several different data collection methods as a way of comparing the information for consistency and irregularities. This is known as triangulation, see below. You could also evaluate how far your research findings compare to other similar research that has been carried out; does it reach very different conclusions or not? This is called external validity. This is not a foolproof measure as other people's research may not be internally valid and your research may cast new light on a situation. It is only one way of evaluating validity.

Triangulation

There is no one 'right' method that will work for any given circumstance. Various factors influence which methods give you useful information, and there are no guarantees that just because one method worked well once it will do so again. One useful tip is not to rely on one method but a combination of two or more. This is known as 'triangulation.'

Triangulation is a surveying term which means checking out your measurements or findings from three different angles or perspectives. We can apply it to community research by making sure we use several methods of obtaining the information we are looking for.

You might find, for example, that a postal survey on your housing estate highlights repairs as an area of concern. You might want to add to this some case histories of the problems people have had with getting repairs done and interviews with housing officers.



b Ethos and ethics of community research

Researching the community means that you will need to take account of what people actually say even if you do not always agree with it. It is also important to make the methods and results of your research accessible to others so that you are accountable for the information collected.

People should only participate in research with their full consent. They can also be partners in the research process where there is a two-way flow of information between the researcher and the person being researched.

Like much social research, community research often involves asking people about their lives, their feelings and their experiences. Some research methods will ask more of people than others, for example, a long one-to-one interview will reveal more about someone's life than a quick questionnaire.

How you decide to conduct your research will raise ethical issues such as:

Equal opportunities
We can consider equal opportunities in different ways. We can make sure that any data collection methods we use are equally appropriate to everyone involved in the research so that everyone is potentially equally able to contribute. We can target those people who are generally excluded from research and provide extra support so they are able to put their views forward or be involved in the actual research process. We can also make issues of inequality the subject of our research.

There are a number of approaches to ensure good practice in your research design.

Strategies for being inclusive

- **recognise that people are different. In any community or group of people there will be differences such as ethnicity, sexuality, family structure etc.**
- **use appropriate data collection methods suitable for people with different needs, for example discussion groups or phone interviews rather than written questionnaires for people who are visually impaired.**
- **provide support to take part on equal terms, such as interpreters and childcare**
- **use different formats such as audio, Braille, different languages or large print, both in the research process and for presenting findings.**
- **ensure meetings are held at suitable times and venues for all.**

Strategies for recognising differences

- **an awareness of the different needs and experiences of different communities will add to the richness of your research**
- **accept that there may be majority and minority views.**

Participation and consent
Are people aware that they are part of a research project? Have they given their consent to be included in the research? This is especially relevant when using methods such as observation or if you are making use of existing research.

Confidentiality

Have people taking part given their informed consent for the use of their information? Have they disclosed sensitive information about themselves that could be traced back and attributed to them?

At the start of your research ask yourself:

- **how much information and feedback should I give back to the people I have been working with?**
- **who now owns the information?**
- **are people aware that research is being carried out?**

Data protection

You also need to check you are complying with the Data Protection Act 1998, which supersedes earlier legislation. It is the law which governs those who hold and deal with personal data – anything from which a living individual can be identified, either because you have included their name or through simple deduction. It applies to manual systems (eg card indexes and filing systems) as well as information held on a computer database. It does not intend to stop you collecting personal data, but sets out how personal data should be obtained, stored, used and disposed of, through eight general principles.

For the purpose of research the most relevant are the first two principles covering obtaining consent and how data is used. You should make people aware that you wish to record information about them and what you will and won't do with the information. Stricter conditions apply to the processing of sensitive data, which includes information relating to racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or other beliefs, trade union membership, health, sex life, and criminal proceedings and convictions. People should be asked to give explicit consent if this information is being collected.

You should also ensure that all recorded data is kept secure and private, perhaps in locked cabinets, or password-protected if on a computer database. It is good practice to detach respondents' names and addresses from the body of questionnaires after checking the data. Either store them separately or destroy them.

Detailed information and guidance is available at www.dataprotection.gov.uk or from

The Data Protection Commissioner
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire SK9 5AF
T: 01625 545700