

CHAPTER 1

What is real-world research?

This chapter:

- explains what is meant by real-world research;
- stresses that many real-world research projects are concerned with evaluating something and that there is often a concern for action or change;
- highlights the value of collaboration and participation for delivering effective projects;
- warns about the dangers of doing harm;
- stresses the importance of the Internet for real-world research;
- attempts to give something of the flavour of real-world projects; and
- concludes by arguing for the benefits of getting some knowledge of methodology (since it is on its fundamental principles that the methods of social research are based) as well as of the practicalities involved in doing a real-world project.

What is real-world research?

As it is used in this book, the term 'real-world research' refers to applied research projects that involve people and their lives and are typically small in scale and modest in scope. These projects seek to deal with issues and problems, usually ones affecting others in some way, where the researcher attempts to provide help. A substantial amount of research of this type is carried out in universities and research institutes by both staff and students, particularly in fields such as business and management, in education and in health-related areas such as nursing, social policy, and social work. There is some work of this kind in academic social science departments, for example psychology and sociology. It commonly takes place also in local government, businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities, and community organizations, where it is performed by professionals and practitioners, including practitioner-researchers.

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This means that real-world research of this kind can help to influence and shape the world we live and work in, apart from sharing in the traditional role of research – namely explaining why the world is in the shape it is in. The focus of real-world research is different from that of much academic research, where the main concern is to develop and extend an academic discipline. The topics selected in academic research are ones of current interest to social scientists in universities and other advanced institutions. Academic, curiosity-driven, pure research is of high prestige in university circles. Real-world, impact-driven, applied research is a rather mixed bag by comparison. Woxenius (2015, p. 401) makes a distinction between ‘curiosity-driven’ and ‘impact-driven’ research:

The stream of curiosity-driven, ‘continuous’, research funded by the universities’ internal means or foundations is drifting apart from the impact-driven, ‘projectified’, research funded by public-sector agencies with industrial influence and cofunding. It is obviously a strong simplification to divide all research into either curiosity-driven or impact-driven... but it can be argued that different sets of researchers build on results from research within their own stream only.

Much real-world research focuses on problems and issues of direct relevance to people’s lives, in order to help them to find ways of dealing with those problems or to understand those issues. There is no shortage of such problems and issues. A fairly random selection that was highlighted at the time of writing includes crime, austerity and social change, climate change, education, terrorism, gambling, anti-social behaviour, obesity and diet, childcare and abuse, and provision for old age.² The hope is that research, in the sense of principled, careful, and systematic enquiry, is one of the best tools available for addressing these issues.

This book focuses on matters that have a ‘people’ dimension and on the relevant research methods and approaches. The focus is not overly restrictive, as all the problems and issues listed so far impinge on humans in some way. Many problems, particularly large-scale global ones such as climate and environmental change, call for expertise in a range of natural sciences and technologies, but their effects on the ways in which people behave (and, further, the effects of these ways on the world around) are an important part of both the problems and their solutions. Hence the book, and the examples used in it, are multidisciplinary. As indicated earlier, the main focus in *Real World Research* is on relatively small-scale research carried out by individuals or small teams. Again, this is not a major restriction, as much real-world research deals with problems and issues that are practical, local, and grounded in a specific context and that need answers on a short timescale.

Even global problems have local implications, so that sensible projects can be carried out with limited resources. For example, Serrao-Neumann, Di Giulio, Ferreira, and Choy (2013) were involved in local-scale projects undertaken in urbanized coastal areas in Brazil and Australia, and they focused on improving the dialogue between researchers and decision-makers for the

²This list is the same as in the previous edition – a warning that real-world research won’t make such problems disappear; which is why they are sometimes referred to as ‘wicked’.

benefit of climate-change adaptation. Their research yielded suggestions for dealing with the issues studied and recommendations for change.

In carrying out this type of research, a strong dose of humility is needed. The work often takes place in highly complex and often volatile situations, where conclusions are necessarily tentative. These situations are almost inevitably political (with both lowercase and capital ‘p’) and there can be many reasons why even eminently sensible proposals arising from the research do not come to pass.

Leaving the laboratory

The notion of a ‘real world’ carries the suggestion of breaking out from the ivory tower and trying to deal with the problems that affect people’s lives directly. It involves moving from the research laboratory into places such as schools, hospitals, businesses, shopping malls, street corners, and any setting where people work, play, and go about their lives. Glascock and Kutzik (2009, p. 1) warn that chaos is almost inevitable when doing this. ‘Why can’t people behave the way they are supposed to and use the technology the way it was intended?’ is a sentence often heard when technology is taken from the lab to the real world. Thus developers spend inordinate amounts of time trying to eliminate the noise of real life rather than accepting that the noise is the key to making the technology work:

We have spent the last five years dealing with this noise as we moved a new behavioral monitoring technology from the laboratory to the real world. Initially, we viewed this noise as a hindrance to this successful transition, but over time we became convinced that without embracing the chaos and listening very carefully to the noise, our monitoring system could not be successfully moved from the laboratory to the real world. This process has been painful at times, but we believe that the lessons we have learned can benefit other developers and perhaps, help them embrace the chaos also. (Ibid., p. 2)

There is ample evidence that findings from laboratory research are not necessarily replicated in other settings. Levitt and List (2006) discuss differences between the data from laboratory experiments and the data generated in natural settings, pointing out that each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and a combination of the two is likely to offer deeper insights than either one in isolation. Identical conclusions come from Gurven and Winking (2008) when comparing studies of altruism and cooperative behaviour in laboratory and in field settings.

It’s similarly dangerous to generalize from studies with university student participants, extending their results to other groups. Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz (2006) conducted an experiment with a group of military officers and replicated it with a group of students at a public university in the United States. In a scenario dealing with a decision problem in the area of counterterrorism, the two groups gave widely differing results. However, Hafner-Burton, LeVeck, and Victor (2017) find no evidence that elites behave in a different manner from that observed in their student sample.

While most real-world research takes place in the field (which is how non-laboratory settings are often referred to by social scientists) and with non-student groups, some researchers with a real-world concern for current practical problems choose to work in laboratories or with student participants (or both). One version of this scenario is the development of ‘real-world laboratories’ (Schäpke, Bergmann, Stelzer, & Lang, 2018). The model involves bringing together participants from different backgrounds into a collaborative research space.

Research evidence and real-world experience

The relative values of research evidence and real-world experience are contested (Oldenburg, 2017).

Orpin (2017) analysed contributions to an online discussion forum, showing that a common strategy used by the critics of the research evidence on the use of vaccines was to claim that vaccines have ‘never been proven to work in the real world’ and that the real world was their own personal experience. Semple, Drouman, and Reid (2017), by contrast, criticize proponents of mindfulness programmes in schools for relying on real-world experience to publicize their success, when ‘none have [*sic*] been evaluated in rigorous, randomized controlled trials, conducted by researchers independent of the program developers’ (p. 49).

The purpose of this book is to give assistance, ideas, and confidence to those who, for good and honourable reasons, wish to carry out investigations involving people with a real-world focus; to draw attention to some of the issues and complexities involved; and to generate a degree of informed enthusiasm for a particularly challenging and important area of work.

Evaluation and change

Much research with a real-world focus is essentially some form of evaluation and is commonly concerned with promoting action (as in action research) and facilitating change. Is the organization of educational provision for children with special needs – such as learning difficulties or problems with sight or hearing – working effectively in a particular local authority area? Does a child welfare service actually serve the interests of the children concerned? Can a business improve its interviewing procedures for new sales staff? Evaluation brings to the fore an agenda of issues that are very different from the ones usually associated with ‘pure’ research. For example, there will be issues related to change. How can it be implemented? The barriers to implementation and how they might be overcome often loom large.

There are influential approaches within applied social research that regard the support and engineering of change as an integral part of the research process. Should you, as a researcher, get involved in these aspects? A possible stance is to say that the researcher’s responsibility ends with achieving some understanding of what is going on and handing that information over to

those directly concerned. An alternative is to say that it is part of the researcher's job to use this understanding to suggest ways in which desirable changes might take place, and perhaps to monitor the effectiveness of these attempts. There are no standard solutions to these issues. In each case, the answers depend to a considerable extent on the situation in which one finds oneself. Certainly, someone attempting to carry out research into the very situation in which they themselves are working or living may find that the change-related aspects become virtually impossible to separate from the research itself.

This mention of what amounts to self-evaluation opens up Pandora's box. At one extreme, some doubt the feasibility of insiders taking part in any worthwhile, credible, or objective enquiry into a situation in which they are centrally involved. Others advocate approaches that involve service users in the research; and they emphasize the benefits of participation, collaboration, and involvement. The problems and stresses of doing research of this type have to be recognized. All of this carries with it the implication that the real-world researcher needs to have knowledge, skills, and expertise in areas outside the likely competence of most academic researchers.

For the activist researcher working for social justice, change is a central concern (Lorenzetti, 2013). For all real-world researchers, a very strong sense of the audience is needed to guide the style, content, and length of any report or communication that arises from the project. If an important objective is related to change, then a report that does not communicate with the decision-makers is a waste of time.

Participation and collaboration

This book concentrates on real-world research related to people and their issues and concerns. Such research makes use of social research methods and consequently is a type of social science. What that implies is discussed in the next chapter. Social science, and a very large proportion of all scientific activity, is nowadays almost invariably the work of groups rather than of solitary researchers. This means that real-world research is very much a team activity. The importance of collaboration with colleagues and others is stressed in Chapter 3, when we start to cover the planning of a real-world research project.

Collaboration and teamwork raise issues in situations where it is necessary to give individual credit to the contribution made by a team member. This can be very problematic for students, where course regulations require certification that something was a student's own work. It can also create difficulties in research teams, particularly in relation to publication. But, with forethought, these issues can be dealt with.

Collaboration between those who carry out a research project is central to much scientific research, but the active involvement of others outside the research team is much more important for real-world research projects than for most other types of research. It means participating by having a role in aspects such as designing and running a project, and not simply by being interviewed or asked to respond to a survey or to take part in an experiment. In past decades, people involved in this second way were often referred to as 'subjects', particularly by psychologists, some of whom still use the term – partly because this kind of participation gives the impression that the

people in question are about to be ‘subjected’ to something. The term ‘subject’ is rarely used today; it has been replaced by ‘participant’, which is preferred in much applied social research, though in this application ‘participant’ typically means only that someone takes part in a study.

But here I understand participation in a wider, more involved sense. A participant is not just someone who takes a part assigned to them by those who run a project; it is someone who has a say in it. This wider meaning of participation is important in real-world research for two main reasons.

First, it helps to make a success of the project. Involved participants are more likely to take it seriously, to be committed. This could cause you problems. Perhaps what happens will disadvantage them in some way. The more they become involved, the less they like it. There are ethical issues lurking here. Perhaps you should have thought this through at an earlier stage and kept away (see the forthcoming discussion on the inevitability of ethical issues in real-world research).

There are others who will be, or could be, involved in a project, and they are sometimes referred to as ‘stakeholders’. If the project takes place in an organization, there are persons in that organization who could have a major influence on the project’s success – perhaps the person who has asked you to undertake the task is in this category. Getting them on board should be relatively straightforward. It is in their interest that things should go well; hence it is in their interest to give you the support you need to do a good job, both in terms of resources and in terms of clearance with others in the organization.

Secondly, participation is important in real-world research because it signals a distinctive view of the nature of research. One aspect of this view is the fact that the movement towards the democratization of research, including social research, appears to be gaining ground. Chapter 2 discusses the implications of this and related matters for real-world research.

Ethical and political issues

Carrying out research that involves people has the potential to harm them in some way. It’s reasonable to assume that most researchers never intend to cause harm. However, even with the best of intentions, this can happen – through lack of foresight, through insensitivity, or as a result of unanticipated problems. It is best to start with the view that such ethical concerns are an inescapable part of each and every real-world research project. In similar vein, real-world research has an almost inevitable political aspect. Your actions may not simply harm (or benefit) the participants, they can serve (or hinder) the interests or concerns of others. Chapter 10 is devoted to these matters. The aim is to sensitize you to the ethical aspects of your research and make you integrate them as part of the planning process.

Returning to the real world

The proposal for a real-world emphasis is reflected in several dichotomies – for example, applied research versus pure or basic research, policy research versus theoretical or ‘curiosity’ research, field versus laboratory. Such dichotomies are probably not very helpful, as they suggest absolute

distinctions. Hakim (2000) sees these differences more in terms of emphasis. For her, the main features that distinguish policy research from theoretical research are, first, an emphasis on the substantive or practical importance of research results rather than on merely ‘statistically significant’ findings and, second, a multidisciplinary approach, which in turn leads to the eclectic and catholic use of any and all research designs that might prove helpful when it comes to answering the questions posed (p. 213).

The emphases and priorities of the real-world researcher differ in several ways from those of the traditional academic researcher. Box 1.1 suggests some of the dimensions involved.

Not all the aspects shown in the box will be manifest in any particular study, but they all go some way to characterizing a certain approach to research. Kelly (2003) illustrates a range of

BOX 1.1

Relative emphases of real-world researchers and academic researchers

<i>Real-world research(er)</i>	<i>Academic research(er)</i>
Interest in solving problems	Interest in gaining knowledge and advancing the discipline
Getting large effects (looking for robust results) and concern for actionable factors (where changes are feasible)	Establishing relationships and developing theory (and assessing statistical significance in quantitative studies)
Researcher almost always works in the field (industry, hospital, business, school, etc.)	Location depends on the focus of the research, but in some disciplines researcher works mainly in the laboratory
Strict time constraints	As long as the topic needs (but time pressures increase)
Strict cost constraints	As much financing as the topic needs (or the work shouldn’t be attempted)
Often little consistency of topic from one study to the next	High consistency of topic from one study to the next
Generalist researchers, who need to be familiar with a wide range of methods and approaches	Highly specialized researchers, preferably at the forefront of their discipline
Oriented to client needs (generally, and particularly in reporting)	Oriented to academic peers (generally, and particularly in reporting)
Currently viewed as dubious by many academic researchers	Carries high academic prestige
Need for well-developed social skills	Some need for social skills

tensions that are found in the fledgling field of community psychology when one tries to meet both the aim of carrying out research that is nested in real communities (and relevant to them) and the expectations of one's reference group of scientific psychologists (see Jason & Glenwick, 2012 for an update in this area).

Entering into this kind of real-world research could, with some justice, be viewed as capitulation to the values of an enterprise culture. There are obvious dangers in being a 'hired hand'. You may, overtly or covertly, serve the agendas of those in positions of power (Scheurich, 1997), perhaps being hired to seek sticking-plaster solutions to complex and intractable problems. As Lynd (1939, p. 178), quoted by Gerring (2012 [2001], p. 400 in the 2001 edn), warned, 'when [a social scientist] pulls his scientific punch by pocketing more important problems and accepts a retainer to work as an expert for the partisan aims of a bank or an advertising agency, he is something less than a scientist'. However, there is the advantage that letting society, in the guise of a client or sponsor, have some role in determining the focus of your research project makes it more likely that findings are both usable and likely to be used. And, as Lynd added, 'when the social scientist hides behind the aloof "spirit of science and scholarship" for fear of possible contamination, he is likewise something less than a scientist'.

As already explained, Box 1.1 highlights the different emphases of real-world research and academic, discipline-advancing research. But, for lecturers or researchers in, say, a university sociology department, carrying out academic, discipline-advancing research is very much their 'real world'. Fortunately for them, there already are many research methods texts that cater to their needs. In more applied fields, such as education or health-related studies, the distinction between discipline-advancing and real-world research can be less clear. Nevertheless, studies that follow issues and controversies within research communities in the area can be distinguished from real-world studies driven by other concerns.

Students

The real world of students on university courses is different from that of faculty staff. For students, an immediate real-world concern is the rules and regulations that govern the degree for which they are registered. Over the horizon is the real world of life after uni. For a few highly academically successful and highly motivated individuals, a university or research career is a possibility. For the many, the successful completion of a real-world research project demonstrates the possession of valuable transferrable skills. In many subsequent jobs that involve dealing with people, be they in public sector institutions, business, or industry, these are directly useful skills.

Why do research in the real world?

Real-world research provides an opportunity for making important organizational, practice, and policy decisions from an informed perspective. This ultimately leads to evidence-based policy and practice – and not to the all-too-common reverse situation in which a policy is decided first and evidence to justify its selection is sought only afterwards.

In the current climate of risk management, accountability, and restricted funding, real-world, applied research becomes more relevant; making risky decisions is too expensive, and all decisions need to be in principle ‘future-proofed’. From an academic perspective the importance of real-world research in the United Kingdom is firmly embedded in funding guidelines from UK research councils and from a part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). However, the reception to the REF in English higher education institutions has not been positive.

The REF states that research should have an impact on society and not sit in isolation.³ Its version of impact defines it as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (UK Research England, 2021).

A damaging claim is that the REF encourages mediocrity in published research and discourages research of potential value in the long term. For example, Ní Mhurchú, McLeod, Collins, and Siles-Brügge (2017) highlight ‘how a focus on direct impact could miss the collective nature of impact endeavours, as well as the broader social and cultural benefits of research, and potentially shape and limit the possible research questions posed within this national system’ (p. 61). Studies are now assessing the REF’s actual effects and go some way to substantiate these claims. Often the research is conducted for, or with, stakeholders; but just because an organization commissions the research, paid or otherwise, it does not follow that that organization has to listen to the outcomes or implement the changes. In consequence, some real-world research can vanish into a vacuum, and this can be frustrating for researchers. It is important to realize that, even though real-world research is important and, as a researcher, you do the best possible job, ultimately the impact of the research is out of your hands.

Although there are difficulties with real-world research, as long as there is from the outset a clear understanding of research ownership, accountability, independence, and the roles of all those involved, a lot of these problems can be mitigated. Real-world research should be central to policymaking, effective practice, and the management of societal change.

Website examples

✧ *The website gives a range of examples of research on real-world topics.*

The examples will give you some idea of the wide variety of such topics. Don’t worry about details of design or analysis at this stage; they are covered in subsequent chapters. Similar website examples are given in most chapters. Most of them are journal articles; others are published reports of various kinds. You are strongly recommended to follow them up whenever the topic interests you. They have all been obtained directly from the Internet. As discussed in Chapter 3, you will need access to an academic library to get full-text versions of much of the

³There are similar approaches in other countries, for example the Australian Research Quality and Accessibility Framework (RQF), the US Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) framework, and the Dutch Evaluating Research in Context (ERIC) framework.

material, although abstracts are often freely available and there is an increasing number of journals with free access to the full text.

Don't be concerned if you can't understand the more technical aspects of an article, particularly in these early chapters. You usually need to get only a general idea of what it is about. Don't be put off by the fact that most articles are multi-authored. Often real-world research is a team activity, and it is not unusual for research students and junior researchers (who might have done most of the work) to have their name coupled with those of project directors, thesis supervisors, and other senior members of staff.

Beginning the journey

One of the beauties and enduring strengths of books is that they are what you may call random access devices. It is up to readers what they select and what they skip. In this book the marked pages, chapter headings, and index are all ways of giving rapid and direct access to the more nuts-and-bolts aspects of research, such as the choice and use of different methods of gathering evidence, of analysing various kinds of data, of writing a report appropriate to a particular audience, and so on.

Be warned, though, that entering into any kind of investigation that involves other people is necessarily a complex and sensitive undertaking. As stressed earlier, ethical issues are almost inevitable. Many social scientists, including those who teach academic courses and prepare students to carry out social research projects, argue that a thorough grounding in methodology (i.e. in the theoretical and philosophical background to social research) is an essential prerequisite. Whether the same prior methodological understanding is necessary to carry out real-world research is the question at issue here. However, it is a good general principle that it does help to know why you are doing what you are doing – and an important part of the 'why' comes from methodology.

Hence, the following chapter seeks to provide enough such background to place the practical aspects of doing a social research project in a theoretical context. There is a more specific reason for the inclusion of this material, and it should be made explicit. Traditionally there has been a fundamental divide between two very different ways of doing social research. One is based very much on collecting data in the form of numbers and on using statistics and is commonly called 'quantitative research'. The other is typically based on words collected in different ways, for instance through interviews and questionnaires, and is commonly called 'qualitative research'. Much more on this later.

Doing a project based on qualitative material is still likely to be viewed as a radical and risky departure in some disciplines, especially those steeped in the statistical sampling paradigm. Hence some justification is called for. One could take the stance that fixed designs of the quantitative sort are preferable in some situations but not in others, and that sometimes it helps to have both kinds of methods; but the claim that a composite whole can be regarded as a scientific enterprise is likely to antagonize both scientists and humanists. There are strongly held views on this matter. So, according to some, there is an ideological divide between qualitative

and quantitative approaches and the two should never meet. Others – Bryman (2006), for instance – consider, on the contrary, that many of these differences are apparent rather than real and that there can be advantages to designs that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (see Chapter 8).

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✧ The website gives annotated references to further reading for Chapter 1.