

## **Chapter 5. Research design and methodological approaches**

### **Introduction**

A key challenge for you as a doctoral researcher is deciding upon the research design that you will use to address your research questions and understanding how to justify your decisions about design. To enable you to make appropriate choices for your own research projects and to enable you to understand the implications of your design choices, this chapter will guide doctoral researchers through the planning stage of their research, including writing their research proposal. We first look at the distinctive features of a quantitative and a qualitative methodology, considering their relative strengths and weaknesses. Second, we examine some of the most popular research methods that you may want to use including surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observation and ethnography. In examining each of these methods, some of the key strengths and weaknesses are discussed. Third, I provide a case study of my own doctoral research to show how I made decisions about methodology and method. The aim of the case study is to apply some of the points raised in the chapter to a research project.

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify the key features of a quantitative and a qualitative methodology;
2. Understand the strengths and limitations of different methodologies;
3. Identify the key features of research methods including surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observation and ethnography;
4. Understand the strengths and limitations of these different methods.

### **Quantitative methodology**

In this section I discuss the key features of a quantitative methodology and outline uses and challenges facing social researchers taking this approach to designing their research project, data collection and data analysis. The aim of this section is to help you decide if and why a quantitative methodology might be a suitable approach for your research project.

The term methodology refers quite simply to ‘a system of methods used in a particular field’ (Newby, 2014: 47). Perhaps the most historically dominant methodological approach on the research continuum is quantitative (Silverman, 2006), partly due to the view that through scientific, so called positivist research, it is possible to uncover objective, generalizable social realities (Bryman, 2008). The positivist paradigm that informs quantitative research is informed by the following key features:

- to identify universal laws and regular relationships;
- to study phenomena that are directly observable;
- to test theories or seek to gather facts that will form the basis for laws;
- to work objectively and thus eliminate the effect of the researcher;
- to employ explicit and standardized procedures to all data collection to achieve consistency.

From what is labelled as a positivist point of view, the task in quantitative research is to conceptualise and measure human behaviour in terms of key variables, and to discover causal relationships among these. A further aim of using a quantitative methodology is to take an objective approach to your project and to strive for neutrality throughout the data

gathering, analysis and writing up stages (Bryman, 2008). If your research project is concerned with providing quantifiable data that measures viewpoints to discover causal factors informing social phenomena, then a quantitative methodology is a useful approach for you to consider.

Students can be drawn to this approach because it can be viewed as an easier data collection tool to deploy. However, there are criticisms of taking a quantitative approach to carrying out research. Very often, the links between perspectives and actions, and between behaviour and its effects, are seen as complex and uncertain, rather than reducible to any kind of universal statement about fixed relationships (Torres, 1998). Other points of view emphasise the need to grasp the forces that structure wider society if we are to be able to understand how institutions, for example, schools or colleges, operate (REF). There are also those who stress what they see as the constitutive role of discourse, which refers to ‘...ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak’ (Lessa, 2006: 285), in generating not just our experience of the world, but also what actually happens within it. Moreover, cross-cutting these differences are disagreements about what the product of social science research ought to be about and what should be the proper relationship between (indeed, about whether there should be any distinction between) researcher and researched.

There are also problems associated with re/presenting the social world as objective because this can lead to the view that it is decontextualized and disembodied. Much recent social science research has paid attention to local context as a way of highlighting the complexity of social interactions (see for example Braun et al, 2011). The view here is that positivist research erases relations of power and (micro)politics from view.

### **Reflection questions**

If you are considering using a quantitative methodology it is useful to consider how you would answer the following questions raised by Skeggs (1997):

- 1) Can we ever be sure we have objectivity and neutrality in research?
- 2) How do the relations of power in the research process influence who can speak, who legitimises and authorises that speech and whose interests are represented?

If you address these points in your methodology chapter, you can reflect on how to manage some of the key limitations associated with positivist, quantitative research design and this reflection will help you defend your work in your viva.

An alternative methodology is qualitative, and this is now discussed.

### **Qualitative methodology**

In this section I outline the key features of a qualitative methodology and some of the uses and limitations of applying it to social science research. Qualitative methodologies tend to focus on examining the following areas:

- Exploring phenomena, rather than testing hypotheses;

- Relatively unstructured rather than structured data;
- Smaller amounts of data are explored in greater detail;
- Analysis involves explicit, detailed interpretation of the ideas and social behaviour of human actors.

Delamont (1992: 7) argues that the qualitative researcher's job 'is to find out how the people you are researching understand their world'. Williams and May (1998: 8) describe qualitative research as primarily 'concerned with the daily actions of people and the meanings that they attach to their environment and relationships. Using a qualitative methodology and methods allow you to access and explore, in depth, the perspectives and constructions of respondents (Usher and Edwards, 1994). Through utilising a qualitative methodology, it is possible for you to gain detailed insight into your participants' worlds through their eyes, giving their meanings and understandings of events. For those researchers not seeking to turn their participants' stories into what feminists Stanley and Wise (1993: 115) refer to as 'generalized mush' making reference to a quantitative methodology, a qualitative methodology can provide an account of the complexities as well as any strands of similarities between individual experiences within a group who share the same status and who potentially experience some of the same structural inequalities. The point here is that social life is complicated, contradictory and nuanced and quantitative methodologies do not engage with these issues.

However, despite its uses, using a qualitative methodology also has a number of drawbacks and limitations. For example, Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that there is a 'mythology' around the possibility of carrying out 'hygienic research'. That is, how can the qualitative researcher be 'there', in the field with their participants in any context, 'without having any greater involvement than simple presence' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 114). They, along with other key commentators (see Hammersley 2003 for an example), argue that as a researcher, your values, views, perceptions of the world and your embodied self will influence the questions you ask in an interview or focus group, the focus of an observation, the leads and questions you follow up on, or choose not to follow up on, and the subsequent choices of data representations that you make. Opie (1992: 52) argues that qualitative interpretations: are restrictive in the sense that they can appropriate the data to the researcher's interests, so that other significant experiential elements which challenge or partially disrupt that interpretation can be silenced.

A qualitative methodology is subjective and open to multiple interpretations that will be shaped by the researcher's values, the respondents' values, the context and the particular moment in time when the research was conducted. As such, a qualitative methodology offers a snapshot in time; it is historically grounded, and the views expressed are often fluid and subject to change as the respondents construct and reconstruct their social realities sometimes in the process of being interviewed (Hoskins, 2015). Thus, the data presented will be partial and incomplete; an insight into stories in progress rather than final or conclusive accounts.

A further key issue is generalisability. Much qualitative research avoids offering any 'researcher-based' discussions of 'analytical generalisation' because it seeks to offer some 'reader-based' opportunities for generalisability, where the reader:

on the basis of detailed contextual descriptions of an interview study, judges whether the findings may be generalised to a new situation (Kvale, 2008: 127).

According to Kvale (2008: 127) it is the process of providing 'high quality descriptions of the interview process and products', coupled with an awareness of validity and generalisability concerns encompassing the conceptual stages through to the completion stage, that lends rigor to the data collection and subsequent analysis. It is due to the:

quality of the craftsmanship in checking, questioning and theorizing the interview findings that leads to knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they, so to speak, carry the validation with them, like a strong piece of art (Kvale, 2008: 124).

The important point for you to remember is that you have to understand how the research design choices you make will impact on the format of the data that you collect and the associated limitations. Your job as a doctoral student is to defend the choices that you make and be able to explain how you overcame some of the limitations.

### **Reflection question**

If you are considering using a qualitative methodology, reflect on how you will address the issues of your own subjectivity whilst in the field. What will you do to ensure you gather valid and reliable data? How will you minimise the influence of your own subjectivity when gathering data?

Moving on, I now discuss the uses and limitations of research methods that are typically (but not exclusively) used in quantitative social science research; surveys and questionnaires. I then discuss the uses and limitations of typically qualitative research methods including interviews, focus, groups, observations and ethnography. This is not an exhaustive list of methods, but they tend to be the most popular with doctoral students and that is why I have chosen them for discussion in this chapter.

### **Surveys**

In this section we consider what a survey is and when it is appropriate in social science research to use a survey. Surveys and questionnaires are often confused with each as they can seem similar in terms of purpose and execution. However, a survey gathers quite different data to a questionnaire. By understanding when we use surveys and when we use questionnaires, it can be easier to understand the differences between them. Put simply, by understanding what each method does, it is far easier to not mix them up in the future. We use surveys in social science research to gather data for the following purposes:

- To find out information about a population;
- To make inferences about ideas/behaviours/knowledge etc. – it all depends upon what you want to know.

Surveys can be a useful and effective way to capture trends and attitudinal changes over time (Bryman, 2008: Newby, 2014). For example, peoples' views on climate change or the purpose of education. Surveys can be quantitative, for example, using Likert scales, to

measure views and ideas people have in relation to, for example, climate change. But they tend to gather elements of statistical data to show trends over time. They can be qualitative and have open ended questions that capture subjective views and opinions that people hold about, for example, climate change or views on the purpose of education, but this is less common in social science research. When we gather quantitative survey data it can be subjected to statistical data analysis and patterns and generalisations can be developed from the findings. Surveys are formulated to gather the views held by groups of people, for example, teachers, refugees, homeowners or climate change activists, so surveys tend to be based on a particular and focused demographic group.

There are some important points to consider when to use a survey and when not to use a survey:

- They are not an 'easy' way to collect data;
- They require careful thought so that you collect data which is valid and truthful.

Ensuring that you have enough responses to achieve statistical validity is a real challenge when undertaking a survey-based research study as most surveys are self-administered by participants (Newby, 2014). People are busy and time is precious, which makes it challenging to achieve high response rates (Punch, 2003). People tend not to prioritise completing surveys for a range of reasons that can include time and the logic of the questions themselves. Another challenge is ensuring that the responses received are accurate, reliable and truthful. Punch (2003) suggests it is better to have a shorter survey that achieves a higher response rate as the answers are more likely to be accurate. He suggests that a survey taking longer than 20-30 minutes is likely to be too long.

**Reflection question:**

Take a moment to consider the last time you completed a survey. How long did you spend reflecting on your answers? How engaging and relevant were the questions? Did you try to complete it as quickly as possible, or did you spend some considerable time reflecting on your responses?

Try to use your own experiences of completing surveys to inform your design.

## **Questionnaires**

We now consider the distinctiveness of questionnaires and the usefulness of this method. Often confused with surveys, the aim of the questionnaire is to gather data in relation to a singular issue or concern. Questionnaires are defined by Newby (2014: 287) as 'structured formats that generate a response by asking individuals specific questions and with the researcher not involved'. The purpose of the questionnaire is to provide understanding of a specific social phenomena. Questionnaires are:

- The most common survey data collection tool;
- Often printed on paper, but can be verbal;
- They are increasingly being used as an online tool – using a button selection technique.

In what follows, I outline some of the different types of questions and other elements you may want to include, to exemplify how you can structure a questionnaire. The main question types are open or closed questions, scaled questions or textual questions. Most questionnaires use a formation of open, closed and Likert scaled response questions.

But what else should feature in your questionnaire? To maximise the potential of gathering data for all questions in a questionnaire, you need to include the following aspects:

- An introduction – this only needs to be a few sentences but it is important as it must explain to your participants what the questionnaire is about, why the data is being gathered and to reassure them that their responses are confidential and will be anonymised when written up;
- Your contact details to ensure they can get in contact with you should they wish to discuss any aspect of the project and their participation;
- A thank you statement so they know that they are appreciated.

There are a number of practical issues that need to be addressed when carrying out questionnaire based research. Some examples of these practical issues you need to think about include how you will find out the postal or email addresses of your participants, e.g. schools where they work. Consider if you need to include a stamped address envelope to ensure a good return for paper copies of your questionnaire. Ensure your questionnaire has been carefully proof read before you send it out to participants. If possible, pilot your questionnaire to check that the structure and questions are clear and identify any areas of weakness or ambiguity.

The advantage of using questionnaires to collect data is that they are cheap to administer, particularly online questionnaires. Even postal questionnaires can be relatively good value for money. The data gathered in questionnaires are standardised and can be easy to analyse as the data is directly comparable. Questionnaires are easy to anonymise which is useful from an ethical perspective.

However, there are disadvantages associated with using this method, which include the issue of incomplete data as participants can skip questions – particularly when using a paper questionnaire. Skipping questions can be more difficult when the questionnaire is online as it is possible to not let participants progress without answering each question. It is also argued that questionnaires lack nuance and so provide limited insight into complex social phenomena (Torres, 1998). A further issue is the difficulty in getting responses due to questionnaire fatigue. To address this issue the design, layout and clarity of your questions can help a great deal. When considering if using a questionnaire is right for your project carefully consider your research question and if, how and why answering it requires questionnaire data.

We now consider qualitative research methods, starting with interviews.

## **Interviews**

In this section I outline the uses and limitations of using interviews to collect qualitative data. Kvale (2008: 1) defines an interview as quite literally an ‘inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee’. He also uses

the metaphor of the interviewer as a traveller who is 'on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home' (Kvale, 2008: 20) as a way of helping you to conceptualise and enact your role as an interviewer.

To justify her use of interviews, Spradley (1979: 34) argued that she wanted to:

... understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them.

This sentiment captures the spirit of carrying an interview study, where the aim is always to tell participant's stories of their experiences and perspectives in a way that they would recognise as a true depiction of their lives.

Kvale suggests that when carryout any type of interview 'advance preparation is essential to the interaction and outcome of an interview' (Kvale, 1996: 126). As such, prior to embarking on any interviews you need to spend time thematizing your study by engaging in the 'formulation of research questions and a theoretical clarification of the theme investigated' (Kvale, 2008: 37). Kvale is referring to the need for theorised and well thought out themes, which are informed and shaped by your research questions.

A further reason for preparation in interview-based research is to avoid so-called 'talk-tracks'. Kvale (2008: 70) cautions that during the interview participants can prepare 'talk tracks' to promote the viewpoints they want to communicate [...] which requires considerable skill from the interviewer to get beyond'. Therefore you should ensure in preparing your interview questions, these can in some instances transcend and disrupt some of the 'talk tracks' that participants may follow in the telling of their stories.

There are different types of interviews and in what follows, I briefly define the key features of unstructured, semi-structured interviews and discuss the uses of each.

An unstructured interview refers to an interview in which there is no specific set of predetermined questions, although the interviewers have topics and points in mind that they intend to cover in the interview setting. An unstructured interview flows like everyday conversation and for those reasons, the questions used are open-ended and the interview itself is informal.

A semi-structured interview is defined by Kvale (1996: 125) as having:

... a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects.

Kvale argues that the strength of a semi-structured interview is the flexibility in the process to follow up and probe the responses provided by participants.

A structured interview refers to a questionnaire style interview, where participants are asked a series of standardised yes/ no or maybe questions and they are not invited to elaborate on their responses. A structured interview is useful in gathering directly comparable data and this can make data analysis an easier task.

These different approaches to interviewing will yield different data and the important point to remember when deciding which type of interview to use is to consider the sort of data your research questions demand. If you are unsure, it is worth piloting an interview to see if any how it helps you gather appropriate data and address your research questions.

### *Limitations of using interviews*

Despite the usefulness of these three different types of interview as a forum for gathering data, there are wide-ranging criticisms of the method, of which I have selected three, on the basis that these three are arguably the most frequently encountered issues. Interviews are complex for several reasons: the first issue discussed here is that of the unequal power relations between the interviewee and the interviewer and as such 'there is a definite asymmetry of power' in the interview setting (Kvale, 1996: 126). Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002: 13) argue that it is important for researchers to consider 'how power is implicated in the process of producing knowledge'. The question of who has power in an interview is a key issue and you must remain alert to the power tensions within the interview process. One practical way to address this issue is through remaining reflexive throughout the data collection, analysis and writing up stages to provide an accurate portrayal of your participants' stories of their experiences.

Second, there is the artificial and constructed nature of an interview in relation to the exchange itself. Drawing on Murphy et al's (1998) 'radical critique of interviews', Hammersley (2003: 120) argues that:

the radicalness of the recent critique lies in its scepticism about the capacity of interviews to provide accurate representations, either of the self or of the world.

The argument here is centred on the constructed nature of what people say in interviews, which Hammersley (2003: 120) sees as being:

closely attuned to the local context, and is driven by a preoccupation with self-presentation and/or with persuasion of others, rather than being concerned primarily with presenting facts about the world or about the informant him or herself.

The question for you, as the researcher, is: how is it possible to present these 'artful productions (interview data)' that may be 'shaped by concerns about self-presentation or persuasion' as 'accurate representations' (Hammersley, 2003: 123) of your participants' stories? Should, for example, your analysis present the 'performative character of what is said in interviews, as accurate representations' (Hammersley, 2003: 123)? In practice, this means that the 'interpretation of data is not merely a theoretical exercise; it also is a contextual exercise' (Ball, 1990: 164). This quote refers to the need to consider the context in which your interviews take place and the power relations present when you are interviewing.

The third and final limitation relates to the trustworthiness, validity and generalisability of interview data. This issue arises from the subjective rather than the objective nature of qualitative interviews. Such issues go 'beyond technical or conceptual concerns and raise epistemological questions of objectivity of knowledge and the nature of interview research' (Kvale, 2008: 120). Obtaining trustworthy and valid data via open-ended qualitative interviews is disputed (see for example Hammersley, 2003: Kvale, 2018). Taking trustworthiness and validity as the first issue, the decisions of why, what and how you can



address these issues is discussed in a wide range of literature (for example, Miles and Huberman, 1994: Walford, 2001: Weis and Fine, 2005: Bryman, 2008: Newby: 2014). According to Kvale (1996: 242), achieving validity in the research process is not:

some final verification or product control; verification is built into the research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Thus, it is achieved through the process of checking, questioning and theorising your data set (and the problems associated with this) and subsequent analysis (see Kvale, 2008: 123-124) and as a researcher you will need to try and maintain a 'continual process of validation' which will 'permeate the entire research process'. In practice, this means that you will need to ensure you are reflecting on your data collection and analysis throughout the research process.

Moving on, we now consider group interviews, known as focus groups, and we explore the uses and limitations of this method.

### **Focus groups**

Focus group interviews are quite simply semi-structured or unstructured interviews carried out in a group setting. This approach to data gathering can be used when your research is seeking to understand shared experiences amongst a group who share some of the same experiences, for example, in their work lives or home lives. The benefit of carrying out focus group based research is the 'interaction found in a group' (Morgan, 1988: 12), which is particularly useful to 'stimulate people in making explicit their views, perceptions, motives and reasons' (Punch, 2009: 147). When undertaking research with children, focus groups can be particularly useful to encourage participants to talk about their experiences in the context and comfort of a group. In addition, carrying out focus group research can disrupt, to some extent, the power dynamics within the research process, as the participants have some opportunities to define and direct some of the information they chose to share with you as the researcher.

However, a strength of the focus group – the interaction found therein – can also be viewed as a weakness because some personalities in the group can be stronger than others, which can mean that not all perspectives and opinions are successfully shared within the group (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013). As the researcher, it will be important for you to manage the interactions in the group and try to ensure parity in responses between your participants.

A further challenge when carrying out focus group research relates to the difficulty of transcribing the interaction as it can be challenging to identify who is saying what. A way of addressing this issue is to request all participants state their name when responding to a question to achieve greater accuracy in the transcription, analysis and subsequent data representations that you make.

### **Observations – strengths and limitations of the method**

The next method we consider is observation. Some form of observation is often used in educational research – usually in combination with interviews. Observations tend to place over a period of time to enable researchers to build up a picture of a social context over time.

However, it is not always possible to have access to a research site for extended periods of time so you will need to work within the constraints of your context.

Observations can be covert or overt, (unknown/known), and participant or non-participant (active/inactive). Each of these is now defined:

Covert participant observation is where the researcher is not known as being a researcher by the participants, but is involved in what they're doing. This is quite rare in social and educational research. An example is a study by James Patrick (1973) *A Glasgow Gang Observed*. Patrick, a young schoolteacher, went undercover with the help of one of his students to investigate the goings-on of a teenage gang.

Covert non-participant observation is where the researcher is not known as being a researcher by the participants, and is not involved in what they're doing. Again, it is quite rare in social and educational research. An example could be studies of crowd behaviour at a football match, the way students use social space in a library or social setting, etc. It has to be quite a populous/anonymous event so the researcher does not stand out.

Overt participant observation is where the researcher is known as being a researcher by the participants, and is involved in what they're doing. These 'overt' practices are far more likely as an option by social and educational researchers. An example is Whyte's classic study *Street Corner Society* (1943). Whyte spent long periods of time living in a neighbourhood in Boston mainly inhabited by first and second generation Italian migrants. It was considered a dangerous and crime-ridden place. Whyte spent a long time getting to know the various people there, and was eventually accepted, and took part in group activities, but it was always known that he was a researcher and was at the same time studying them.

Overt non-participant observation is where the researcher is known as being a researcher by the participants, and is not involved in what they are doing. This is the most common form of observation activity, and the one most commonly used with children in the context of educational research. The observer is visibly an outsider to the group, the group knows they are there and will often know why they are there. The observer tries not to get involved.

Some challenges associated with carrying out observations relate to what you observe and why. Observations can be structured or unstructured. To carry out a structured observation, the researcher begins with a list of things to observe and counts the number of times that this action, behaviour, activity or talk occurs in the context. To carry out an unstructured observation the researcher makes notes on any action, behaviour, activity or talk in the context in an unstructured way. There are issues with both approaches as it can be difficult to count instances accurately in many research contexts, for example a classroom or a hospital ward, and it can be challenging to be sure that unstructured observations capture the complexity and variety of what is going on in a given social context in any given moment in time (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). To address these challenges, you must give careful thought and attention to what you are going to observe and how you are going to record your observations. A pilot observation is always useful as you can try out how much is reasonable to observe in one observation session. By carefully planning the focus of your observations, you can gather useful, comparable and rigorous data.

### **Ethnography, strengths and limitations of the approach**

The final method reviewed in this chapter is ethnography, which has been described by Agar (1980: 9) as follows:

In ethnography ... you learn something ('collect some data'), then you try to make sense out of it ('analysis'), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience ('collect more data'), then you refine your interpretation ('more analysis'), and so on. The process is dialectic, not linear.

The term dialectic refers to the art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments.

There is an important difference between what Green and Bloome (1997) refer to as 'doing ethnography' compared with 'adopting an ethnographic perspective' and compared with 'using ethnographic tools'. Doing ethnography is the approach taken by many social anthropologists. Classically an anthropologist would go and live with members of another culture for long periods of time, observing them and interviewing them and collecting documentary materials. For this reason ethnography as a method is wider than just observation, as it includes interviewing and documentary analysis. Adopting an ethnographic perspective refers to taking 'a more focused approach (i.e., do less than a comprehensive ethnography) to study particular aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a social group' (Green and Bloome, 1997: 4). Finally, using ethnographic tools refers to the 'use of methods and techniques usually associated with fieldwork. These methods may or may not be guided by cultural theories or questions about social life of group members' (Green and Bloome, 1997: 4). It is important at the outset that you identify which method is more useful and appropriate to enable you to address your research questions.

Ball highlights some of the key challenges and limitations of working ethnographically in the following quotation:

For the student ethnographer, the decision to choose fieldwork as the primary method for research is typically a plunge into the unknown. Participant observation in natural settings is probably the least well understood, most feared, and most abused of all the contemporary methods of educational research. Crucially - and this is often ignored or underplayed by methods texts and in methods courses - the choice of ethnography carries with it implications about theory, epistemology, and ontology. Ethnography not only implies engagement of the researcher in the world under study; it also implies a commitment to a search for meaning, a suspension of preconceptions, and an orientation to discovery. In other words, ethnography involves risk, uncertainty, and discomfort (Ball, 1990: 157).

Ball goes on to highlight that researchers must work hard in the field for extended periods of time to ensure that they gather the data they need; 'they must charm the respondents into cooperation. They must learn to blend or pass in the research setting, put up with the boredom and the horrors of the empty notebook, cringe in the face of *faux pas* made in front of those whose cooperation they need, and engage in the small deceptions and solve the various ethical dilemmas which crop up in most ethnographies' (Ball, 1990: 157). The key challenges here relate to the difficulty of gathering data ethnographically, the time needed to

build relationships that make gathering useful data much more successful and the importance of navigating a social context where you have little understanding of the everyday nuances taking place.

Despite the challenges, ethnography can provide detailed descriptions of social life and social context that is not easily found using other research methods (see for example Crowe and Hoskins, 2019). Ethnography is also, according to Hymes (1996: 13) a useful approach in a democratic society:

The fact that good ethnography entails trust and confidence, that it requires some narrative accounting, and that it is an extension of a universal form of personal knowledge, makes me think that ethnography is peculiarly appropriate to a democratic society.

Now that we have reviewed methodologies and methods, it is useful to consider a real life research case study that draws on some of the issues raised so far in this chapter.

### **Real life case study**

To exemplify some of the challenges I encountered when carrying out qualitative research, I use my own doctoral research study to provide a case study of the methodology choices I made. The aim here is to share with you the decisions I made, the strengths and limitations of my choices, and how I addressed the methodological limitations inherent in my own research.

My PhD examined how senior female academics (all were professors) constructed their career 'success' and how those constructions were shaped by social class, gender and ethnicity. To understand how to frame and interpret my participants' stories and experiences, I decided to take a feminist epistemological approach to my research. I followed Maynard's (1994: 10) view that:

Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate (Maynard, 1994: 10).

I argued in my thesis that all research is informed and shaped by the researcher's assumptions, whether or not these are made explicit. My epistemological assumptions influenced my decisions of methodological perspective and choice of methods. Denscombe (1998: 3) suggests that every research decision 'brings with it a set of assumptions about the social world it investigates' and that, as such, 'each choice brings with it a set of advantages and disadvantages'.

To understand how senior female academics constructed and experienced their objective career 'success', I decided to utilise a social-constructionist epistemology, which is outlined by Edwards et al (1995: 436) (cited in Burr, 2003: 92) as follows:

the epistemic sense of social constructionism rests on the notion that as soon as we begin to think or talk about the world, we also necessarily begin to represent. Talk involves the creation or construction of particular accounts of what the world is like.

This perspective views society as socially constructed through discourse and people's daily interactions with each other, and these interactions are manipulated to maintain the social

and economic status quo across society (Burr, 2003). Such an approach was appropriate for my feminist research which sought to disrupt and challenge taken for granted norms and assumptions about women's lives and their careers.

Feminist epistemologies are concerned with challenging 'the legacy of white male hegemony which tyrannizes many forms of knowledge, knowers, and approaches to knowing' (Marshall and Young, 2006: 68). To do this involves problematising the familiar, the taken for granted. Yet there is no one particular feminist epistemology and much detailed discussion about what counts as feminist epistemology (see for example Smith, 1997; Hekman, 1997). Indeed, as Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 24) point out 'there is more than one feminist theory and more than one feminist epistemological position'. However, according to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 103) there are some key characteristics of feminist epistemology:

feminist knowledge encompasses movement between partial knowledges, limited experiences and specific social locations, and justifiable, accountable, reasonable knowledge of social interaction, experiences, meanings, relations and structures.

I also recognised that my attempt to 'tell 'better stories' of gendered social realities' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 3) was fraught with challenges, problems and obstacles that had to be grappled with. For example, feminist researchers are:

under increasing pressure from the wider academic community to justify their knowledge in terms of, for example, rationality, validity, rules of method, control or subjectivity and political bias (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 3).

According to Lather (1991: 71 italics as original) social constructionism is central to feminist research. She argues:

To do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the centre of one's inquiry... The overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position.

Thus, feminists' concern with giving expression to women's voices can 'be seen as part of a broad trend towards contextualizing social life through an appreciation of individual experiences' (Coffey and Delamont, 2000: 61). Drawing on a qualitative methodology facilitated my efforts to understand the nuances and differences of how my cohort experienced and constructed their engagement with having, what might be described as, objectively successful careers.

Yet despite its usefulness, I want to finish the case study by outlining a couple of the limitations of my chosen epistemological and methodological approach to the data gathering and analysis and how I addressed these in my research. The first criticism is one levelled at feminist researchers who, it has been argued, may sometimes focus on experiences related to gender at the exclusion of other factors such as class, race, nationalism, sexuality and age (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). Thus, within this viewpoint, women's lives are liable to be reducible to a narrow and one-dimensional identity. However, my research did, with some success and failure, engage with social class background, gender and race in an attempt to offer a thorough and detailed account of how the respondents' identity shapes their experiences and constructions of career success.

The second criticism, again related to undertaking research informed by a feminist

perspective, is the blurring between English-language feminism and its brushes with post modernism and post structuralism, which has resulted in questions being asked about power relations and “the foundations of feminist knowledge and methodology” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 4). My research took a post-modern approach where facets of identity (gender, class and race) were not ‘abandoned’ but interrogated, which:

means that their histories should be questioned, the constitution and crossings of their boundaries examined, and their multiplicities enabled, in order to show what makes some identities powerful in relation to others, and how this power is exercised (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 92).

As such, I questioned the aspects of my respondents’ identities I set out to examine to consider how power is mediated through aspects, or combinations of aspects, of identity which result in unequal distributions of power between people.

The aim of this case study has been to show you how epistemology and methodology informs research design, how all epistemological and methodological approaches have flaws and how to go about addressing these flaws. To begin the process of designing social science research, you must first understand your epistemological position. You must then decide upon an appropriate methodology and ensure that the methods used will enable you to gather relevant data to address your research questions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined the key features of different methodologies and methods used in social science research. The aim has been to help you understand how design decisions influence the sort of data that you can gather. From reading this chapter, the main points for you to take away and reflect on are:

- How do your research questions inform the type of methodology and method(s) that you will use?
- How will you address any of the research methods’ weaknesses in the process of gathering and analysing your data?
- How will defend your choice of methodology and method(s) in a viva?

When you can answer these questions convincingly, then you have made significant progress in your work, so well done! Remember, in social science quantitative or qualitative research it is important to ensure that you understand the strengths and limitations of the methodology and methods you are going to use and to work with your supervisory team so that you can explain to them how you will address any shortcomings.

The chapter has covered some of the most common methods used in social science research, but of course there are others. In a short chapter it is difficult to cover all of the useful methods, particularly those related to new technologies. As such, I finish this chapter by signposting some further reading that you might find useful.

## **Further reading:**

In this section I outline two useful readings for you to follow up on and briefly summarise the value of the reading. The first useful reading to follow up on is:

Hines, C. (2005) *Virtual Methods. Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Berg: Oxford.

This reading will introduce you to some of the key issues associated with carrying out research in online spaces. The chapters in this edited book each provide a detailed exploration of the problems and opportunities surrounding Internet-based research. If you are planning a research project involving the Internet will find this book an essential guide.

The second reading is:

Punch, K. (2009) *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. London: Sage.

This book provides a thorough and balanced look at the variety and complexity of methods that can be used in education. Whilst the focus is on educational contexts, the book is written in a way that makes it relevant to all social science researchers, regardless of their subject area.

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