3

Four Research Design Tasks

3.1 Chapter Summary

- The research methods literature abounds with ideas on what constitutes a research design. However, many of these ideas are unhelpful as they:
  - deal with limited aspects of a research design;
  - are not mutually exclusive; or
  - are not comparable.
- Designing research involves giving consideration to a range of core elements, each with a number of choices, combinations of which lead to a wide variety of possible research designs.
- The basic aim in designing social research is to achieve maximum control over the research process.
- While a researcher's ability to achieve control will vary according to the nature of critical elements in the design, careful planning before the research commences makes it possible to evaluate the suitability and compatibility of the combination of decisions that need to be made; this will help to ensure a successful outcome.
- The preparation of a research design can start with different elements and proceed in a variety of sequences.
- While statements of the topic and research problem need to be produced, they will no doubt be reviewed and possibly modified as the research design evolves and the research itself proceeds.
- An important issue for all researchers is how to regard their relationship with research participants; various stances are possible, each with its particular ontological and epistemological baggage.
- It is essential to maintain consistency between the stance adopted and the assumptions entailed in the choices made about the research design elements, in particular the logics of inquiry and the sources and methods for data collection or generation.

3.2 Introduction

Social research is the use of controlled inquiry to answer research questions. *Research design* refers to the process that links research questions, empirical data and research conclusions. Colloquially, a research design is *a logical plan for getting from here to there*, where *here* may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and *there* as the answers to these questions. Between 'here' and 'there' may be found a number of major steps, including the collection and analysis of relevant data (Yin 2003a: 20). '[W]hen designing social research we need to ask: given this research question (or theory), what type of evidence is needed to answer the question (or test the theory) *in a convincing way*?' (de Vaus 2001: 9).

Control is achieved through a series of decisions that are made before the research commences. This is not to suggest that complete control of all aspects of the research process is always possible; other decisions may need to be made in the course of the research. All eventualities cannot be anticipated and, in some areas of research, control may be very difficult to achieve. For example, some methods of data collection and/or generation, such as participant observation, are very unpredictable in terms of how they will develop and where they will take a researcher. However, the aim should be to achieve maximum control over all aspects of a study.

This chapter:

- sets the scene for what will follow in later chapters;
- critically evaluates the common views and classifications of research design in the social sciences;
- presents an alternative view;
- discusses the fundamental requirements of a research design;
- provides an overview of the range of core elements of a research design;
- outlines the choices available for each element;
- reviews possible influences on these choices; and
- discusses the first steps in preparing a research design.

The subsequent chapters deal with the major research design decisions in detail.

3.3 Common Views of Research Design

The concept of 'research design' has a range of meanings, from narrow to broad. It includes the controlled experiment, linear stages of measuring concepts to establish relationships between variables, and an emerging developmental process.

At the narrow extreme is the experiment, the type of design against which most other designs may be regarded as compromises. Concern focuses on how to ensure that an experiment is capable of answering a particular 'why' research question, such that the effect of an independent variable, which is manipulated, can be assumed to be responsible for the observed changes in a dependent variable, the outcome. The design is intended to rule out the possibility that some

other features of the experimental situation can confound the independent variable. These design decisions are about the selection of experimental and control groups, the administration of the observations or measurements, and the type of statistical analysis to be used.

Four criteria are commonly used to evaluate this type of research design: spatial control, temporal control, analysis of changes and representativeness. Spatial and temporal controls are achieved by the use of one or more control groups in at least one of which the individuals do not receive the experimental treatment. The experimental and control groups can be made roughly equal in composition either by matching individuals in terms of relevant characteristics, or by assigning individuals to them by a randomizing procedure. Analysis of change is achieved by comparing the individual responses in the pre-test and post-test groups, rather than the overall or average change for the group. Representativeness is concerned with the selection of experimental subjects in a way that allows the findings to be generalized to wider populations. However, selection procedures in experimental designs are usually more concerned with random allocation to experimental and control groups, and pay little or no attention to the selection of subjects from a population. Subjects may just be volunteers; in university research they are frequently students.

A broader and very conventional view of research design involves specifying the relationships between a set of concepts – including hypothesized relationships – then stating how the concepts will be operationalized (measured) to produce variables than can be analysed using some statistical procedure. However, while this view was popular in the past, it is only one way of doing research.

One of the early challenges to this view in the United States came from Lincoln and Guba (1985); they offered *naturalistic inquiry* as an alternative, now usually referred to as qualitative research. They went as far as to argue that naturalistic inquiry cannot be designed in advance; it must emerge, develop and unfold.

- The focus of a study may change as do the procedures.
- Theory emerges rather than being stated at the beginning.
- Concepts are not operationalized but are sensitive homing devices.
- Sampling is more concerned with scope and range of information than representativeness.
- Analysis is not statistical but is a search for understanding.
- End products are difficult to specify as the course of the research is unpredictable. (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 224–5)

These three views of research design are frequently referred to as *experiments*, *social surveys* and ethnographic or *field research*. However:

- few social (as against behavioural) scientists use experiments, mainly because they are either inappropriate or impossible to set up;
- many social scientists use the conventional linear approach to research design even when it is not appropriate; and
- some extreme kinds of naturalistic research may be as unpredictable as Lincoln and Guba have suggested.

The critical issue here is that the approach to research has to match the requirements of the research questions posed. Many design elements have to be considered in an attempt to answer these questions. As a wide variety of combinations of decisions on these elements are possible, there is a wide variety of possible research designs for which these three labels are inadequate. While the flexibility of a developmental approach to research design may be attractive, most research, particularly that conducted by postgraduate students, has to meet deadlines and needs some assurance of a successful outcome.

3.4 Common Classifications of Research Designs

Textbooks on social research methods and research design have discussed a wide range of research designs, often devoting a chapter or significant section to each one. Here is a list of them.

- Experiments
- Social surveys
- Field work/ethnography
- Longitudinal study
- Cross-sectional study
- Case study
- Comparative/historical
- Secondary analysis
- Action research
- Evaluation research
- Impact assessment

See, for example, Denzin 1970; Labovitz and Hagedorn 1976; Smith 1981; Chadwick et al. 1984; Sedlack and Stanley 1992; Bailey 1994; Hakim 2000; de Vaus 2001, 2006; Blaxter et al. 2002; Yin 2003a; Bouma and Ling 2004; Bell 2005; Sarantakos 2005; Neuman 2006, 2014; Babbie 2016; Bryman 2016. Many textbooks and book chapters confine their attention to only one of these designs.

Some classifications make a division between *experimental*, *quasi-experimental* and *non-experimental* designs. The latter include social surveys, sometimes referred to as correlational designs because they, unlike experiments, cannot establish causation.[1] Using time as the key criterion, a common classification is *experimental*, *longitudinal*, *cross-sectional* and *case study*. De Vaus (2001, 2006) has expanded these into six types: experimental, panel, retrospective, cross-sectional, comparative/cross-national, and case study.

It has also become a common practice to use just two broad categories, *quantitative* and *qualitative*, with divisions within each category (see e.g. Neuman 2006, 2014; Punch 2014; Babbie 2016). 'Mixed methods' has now been added to these (Creswell 2003; Bergman 2008; Bryman 2016; Creswell and Plano Clark 2017; Creswell and Creswell 2018). However, the usefulness of the quantitative/-qualitative dichotomy in this context will be questioned in chapter 9.

3.5 An Alternative View

The concept of research design used in these classifications is very limited and confusing. Of course, social researchers can do surveys and conduct experiments, but surveys are about particular methods of data selection, collection and analysis, and an experiment is about selecting groups and timing data collection. Similarly, secondary analysis is mainly about particular sources of data. Also, ethnography, comparative research, case studies, evaluation research and action research can combine a number of methods of data collection and/or generation and analysis. Hence, the first problem with these classifications is that each type of research design deals with some elements but none of them deals with them all.

The second problem is that the categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, surveys can be used in comparative studies, case studies and evaluation research; and experiments, comparative studies, case studies and evaluation research can use a variety of methods of data collection and/or generation and analysis.

The third problem is that the categories are not exhaustive of the aspects of research that they do cover. For example, there are other ways of achieving control over variables, and there are many other sources of data and methods for producing and analysing data than those identified. *These conventional categories mask the many choices that need to be considered in preparing a good-quality research design.*

Fundamental Requirements

A research design contains many elements (see Figure 3.1), and almost all of them involve a choice from among alternatives. While some combinations of choices may be common, and others may not be legitimate, there is potentially a wide variety of possibilities. The resulting combinations of decisions produce an array of designs that cannot easily be described by a set of simple labels. For this reason, we do not follow the conventional classifications.

Adopting this approach avoids a ritualistic adherence to recipe-book solutions. As a first step in this direction, we will examine in broad outline what any research design should achieve.

In general, a research design needs to answer three basic questions.

WHAT will be studied?
WHY will it be studied?
HOW will it be studied?

The last question can be broken down into five further questions.

WHAT logic of inquiry will be used?
WHAT ontological and epistemological assumptions will be adopted?
WHERE will the data come from?
HOW will the data be collected/generated and analysed?
WHEN will each stage of the research be carried out?

If these questions are answered satisfactorily, a researcher should be clear about how the research is to proceed. In practice, however, to answer these eight questions, a number of aspects of research have to be addressed and many decisions need to be made. Because of the variety of kinds of research undertaken in the social sciences, it is not possible to be dogmatic about all the details to be considered in a research design. Nevertheless, some components are relevant to most designs.

Four Tasks and Core Elements

In chapter 2 we discussed major elements of a research design. These elements are elaborated further in this chapter. They have also been grouped into four primary research design tasks: *Focusing*, *Framing*, *Selecting* and *Distilling* (see Figure 3.1).

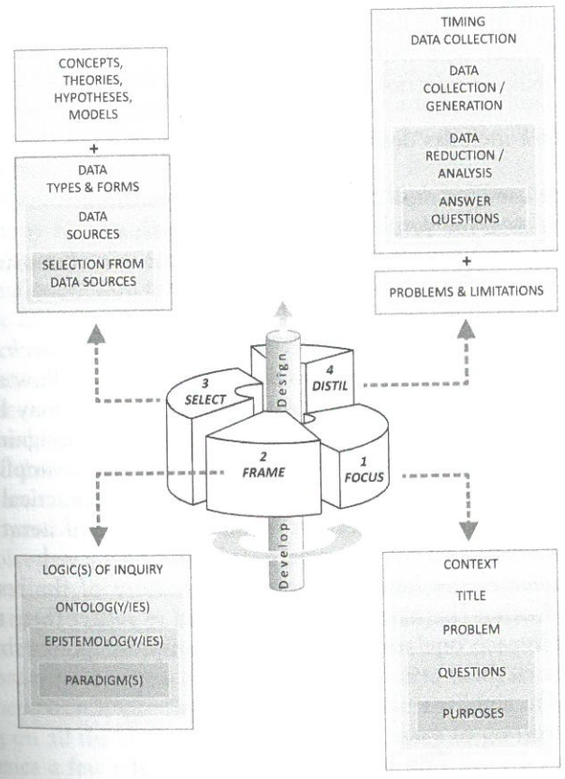

Figure 3.1 ***Designing research***: an iterative process comprising four main tasks with components that progressively reflect the design's choices and specifications

The *Focusing task* includes decisions about the:

- *context* in which the research will be undertaken,
- *title* or topic that will be used to identify the study,
- *problem* to be investigated;
- *questions* that will make the problem researchable; and
- *purposes* that these questions will serve.

The *Framing task* includes decisions about the:

- *logic(s) of inquiry* to be used to answer the research questions;
- *ontological and epistemological assumptions* that will be adopted; and
- *paradigm(s)* associated with these assumptions and from which theoretical ideas may be derived.

The *Selecting task* includes decisions about the:

- *concepts, theories, hypotheses and models* that might be required to answer particular research questions;
- *types and forms* in which data will be required;
- *sources* from which data will be obtained; and
- methods for making *selections from data sources*.

The *Distilling task* includes decisions about:

- methods to be used for *data collection and/or generation*;
- methods to be used for *data reduction and analysis*; and
- a statement of the possible *problems and limitations* of research using this design.

While the design process is most likely to start with a *research problem*, the order in which these core elements are addressed does not follow any particular sequence. While the decisions made on the earlier elements may limit the decisions that can be made on the later ones, the process of designing research is iterative in nature rather than being a set of linear steps. As the implications of the earlier decisions are explored, they may turn out to be impractical or unachievable. Therefore, the process is likely to require a number of iterations before a consistent and workable set of design decisions can be achieved.

Figure 3.1 indicates the iterative and cyclical nature of the research design process. The following chapters are also organized to reflect these tasks and the design elements in each one are elaborated at appropriate points throughout the book.

The Ideal and the Practical

As has been argued earlier, all decisions that are concerned with the design of a research project should, if possible, be made before any substantial work has commenced. This *is* possible in studies conducted on topics that have already been well researched and for which there is adequate background information. Such studies may be the next step in a research programme that has used well-tried methods and for which appropriate published reports are available. However, some studies may require preliminary or exploratory research to establish an adequate background against which choices can be made. This preliminary work may just involve the examination of statistical data, such as that produced in a census, but it may also require some field work; that is, some contact with the site and the people who are to be involved in the research. In other studies, it may not be possible to make all the choices before the research commences, either because not enough is known about the field or the social context, or because the nature of the proposed logic of inquiry and methods requires that a developmental process be adopted. The latter involves making choices at the beginning of each stage of the research, based on what was learned in the previous stage.

It is possible for researchers to avoid dealing with these choices if they operate within a research community that consistently works within a particular paradigm in a taken-for-granted manner. The need for choices will not be evident because those implicit in the paradigm will be adopted without discussion or, perhaps, any awareness that they have been made; the assumptions and methods to be used will be regarded as self-evident. Other researchers may avoid the need to critically examine the range of choices by simply adopting those methods with which they are most familiar and comfortable, and design the research project to use such methods.

Making the choices necessary to design a research project requires careful consideration of many factors, from fundamental philosophical and value positions to technical and practical matters. These choices are interdependent. The choice of research question(s), and the way it/they are worded, places limitations on the choices of logic of inquiry. The choice of a particular logic of inquiry may constrain the choice of research methods. The choice of a particular method of data gathering or generation limits the choices of methods of data analysis, and so on. However, choices made in the early stages of the research design process may have to be revised in the light of circumstances that require a change in the sample or methods of data collection. Problems with access to people, organizations or other data sources may require compromises to be made to an ideal design, and these compromises may require a revision of other choices. For example, a chain of choices may lead to a decision to use a mail questionnaire to gather data. However, if it is discovered that access to the required names and addresses cannot be obtained in order to draw a random sample and contact respondents, it may be necessary to use snowball sampling, and in-depth interviews. Therefore, it will be necessary to choose a different method of data analysis and, possibly, to reformulate the research questions and adopt a different logic of inquiry. Hence, before settling on all the choices, it is usually necessary to go through the design decision sequence a few times in order to deal with the obstacles and limitations that are encountered.

3.6 Getting Started

Having defined the fundamental requirements of a research design, and laid out the range of tasks and elements that need to be considered, we are now in a position to begin preparing a research design. However, we need to reiterate a point made at the end of chapter 2, that designing research involves both a *process* and a *product*. This distinction is related to the differences in the research itself, between 'logic in use' and 'reconstructed logic', which were noted at the beginning of chapter 1.

Research Topic and Problem

The starting-point for social research is usually a *research problem*, either *social* or *sociological*. A *social* problem is a state of affairs that is judged by someone, for example a social scientist or a policy-maker, to be unsatisfactory and in need of some form of intervention. A *sociological* problem is a puzzle that a social scientist considers needs to be solved; that is, explained or better understood.[2] Stating the research problem clearly is the first challenge, but it may need to be revised as work on the research design proceeds.

In conjunction with the selection and definition of the problem to be investigated, a *title* is required. This provides both a signpost and a set of boundary markers: it indicates that the research will follow a specific path; and it defines the territory to be explored. Here are some examples of titles that will be used throughout the book and as illustrations in chapter 12 (see Appendix II for examples of other research problems and topics).

Environmental Worldviews and Behaviour among Students and Residents
Age and Environmentalism: A Test of Competing Hypotheses
Gender Differences in Environmentalism: Towards an Explanation
Motivation for Environmentally Responsible Behaviour: The Case of Environmental Activists

While it is useful to have a clear and concise title at the outset, it is not uncommon for the initial attempt to be rather vague or imprecise. The direction in which the signpost points, and the inscription on it, may change in the course of preparing the research design. It may take much thought and reading, a number of trial runs, and even some exploratory research, before the title is settled. In fact, the final version of the topic may not become clear until the time of writing the report or thesis. Therefore, novice researchers should not be concerned if difficulties are encountered in defining and labelling the topic in the early stages. The focus should be on the problem statement.

It is a common mistake to believe that, having arrived at a title and stated the problem, the researcher is in a position to commence the project. Even well-formulated problem statements provide very little direction for the design of a project. Something more is required. This is achieved mainly by stating one or more research questions (see chapter 5).

Influences on the Choice of Topic and Problem

An important aspect of any research project is the reasons why it is to be undertaken. Some social research requires a considerable investment of resources, and even if this is mainly the researcher's time, justification for doing it is necessary. There are a number of dimensions to the way in which this justification can be made, and these involve motives and goals of various kinds. Most projects will entail several of these. At the same time, there are various factors that can place limitations on the choice of topic.[3]

Motives

In an academic environment, research is conducted for *personal*, *academic* and *social* reasons (see chapter 2, 'Motives and goals').

An examination of the motives behind the four sample research topics stated earlier will help to illustrate how personal, academic and social motives can be combined. The first of the research topics, *Environmental Worldviews and Behaviour*, was motivated by a personal curiosity about the kind and level of environmental attitudes and behaviour currently adopted by Australians. This arose from reading some of the American literature on environmental sociology. This curiosity was then translated into a desire to fill a gap in knowledge and, at the same time, to compare the Australian situation with that in the United States and other parts of the world. The main motive for the second topic, *Age and Environmentalism*, was an academic concern to advance our knowledge of why some people have more favourable environmental attitudes and engage in higher levels of environmentally responsible behaviour than others. Of course, this knowledge could also have some practical benefits for the design of environmental education programmes and for groups and organizations that are committed to protecting and improving the quality of the natural and built environments. Topic three, *Gender Differences in Environmentalism*, was motivated by an academic desire to make more sense of the rather confused findings in previous research on gender and environmentalism. Are women more environmentally conscious than men, and, if so, what are the nature and origins of these differences? Again, the results of research on this topic could also benefit environmental education programmes and, perhaps, make a contribution to the ultimate survival of the human race! The fourth topic, *Motivation for Environmentally Responsible Behaviour*, is essentially a theoretical puzzle: why do some people behave responsibly and others not? However, this puzzle is also

Influences

- **Motives**
  - Personal interests and goals
  - Discipline contribution
  - Social contribution
- **The literature**
- **Restrictions**
  - Audiences
  - Political
  - Funding bodies
  - Practical considerations

related to specific social problems; for example, reducing litter and pollution, saving energy and conserving non-renewable resources. It may be necessary to understand the motivation for environmentally responsible behaviour in those who practise it in order to know what would be necessary to change the behaviour of others. Hence research that is primarily directed towards solving a *sociological* problem can also assist in the solution of *social* problems.

It is important for researchers to articulate their motives for undertaking a research project, because different motives may require different research design decisions. This articulation will also help to reveal conflicts or inconsistencies in an individual's motives, within a research team, or between the researcher(s) and other stakeholders. It is sensible to resolve these differences before the research commences.

The literature

A major source of influence on the nature and choice of a research topic, particularly in basic or theory-oriented research, is the relevant body of literature in both a researcher's and related disciplines. A research project can be stimulated by the results of previous research and by problems posed by theorists. Even if the topic originates elsewhere, one or other of these bodies of literature is likely to help shape the way the topic and the problem are formulated. However, as we shall see in due course, 'the literature' plays other roles in research.

Restrictions

A number of factors can place restrictions on the choice of topic, including: a range of possible *audiences* or stakeholders the researcher has to, or wishes to, take into consideration; the *political* restrictions that may be imposed by authorities such as governments and universities; the types of research that *funding bodies* are willing to support; and practical factors, such as the ability to get access to desired research sites, or the range of skills a researcher possesses.

Audiences or stakeholders include: clients on whose behalf the research is being conducted (whether or not they are paying for it); sponsors who are funding the research; colleagues; scientific communities (particularly the editors of journals); employers; and potential future sources of funding (Smaling 1994). Of course, each audience may have different expectations of, and degrees of influence on, the design and execution of a research project, let alone what it might find. This is particularly important in the case of applied research as, in contrast to basic research, the researcher may have much less freedom in defining the problem and making other research design decisions. This can certainly occur if the sponsors, the main audience and the major benefactors coincide.

It is worth noting that in competitively funded basic research there are usually some constraints on research design. Funding bodies not only have expectations about what kinds of research projects are legitimate or important, but they are also likely to have prejudices about what they regard as appropriate methods for data collection and/or generation and analysis. In order to obtain research funds, prudent researchers need to take these expectations into account in designing a project, or be well prepared to defend less popular methods.

Basic and Applied Research

Motives for undertaking research are associated with the type of research; that is, whether it is basic or theory-oriented research, or whether it is applied or policy-oriented research. Refinements have been made to this dichotomy (e.g. pure basic, oriented basic, applied strategic and applied specific), but the basic/applied distinction is adequate for present purposes.

Basic research is concerned with producing knowledge for understanding, and *applied* research with producing knowledge for action. Both types of social research deal with problems, the former with theoretical problems and the latter with social or practical problems. Basic research is concerned with advancing fundamental knowledge about the social world; in particular, with the development and testing of theories. Applied research is concerned with practical outcomes, with trying to solve some practical problem, with helping practitioners accomplish tasks, and with the development and implementation of policy. Frequently, the results of applied research are required immediately, while basic research usually has a longer time frame.

Different orientations are involved when researchers conduct basic rather than applied research. Basic research is more detached and academic and researchers will tend to have their own motives. Applied research is more pragmatic and change-oriented, and generally others set the goals. However, the issue of detachment is rather more complex than this simple comparison suggests. In some research traditions, detachment is considered to be necessary to achieve objectivity. In other traditions, it is claimed that detachment and, hence, objectivity, is impossible. It is also important to note that the theoretical and/or political commitments of some researchers – for example, critical theorists and feminist researchers with emancipatory commitments – can produce basic research from which detachment is absent. We shall come back to these issues later.

For an example of basic research, we draw on a research project conducted in New Zealand in the 1960s (Blaikie 1968, 1969, 1972). The curiosity was about whether the relationship between religion and occupation that Weber (1958) had found in Germany about 150 years ago, and that Lenski (1961) and others had found in the United States in the early 1960s, was also present in New Zealand. If this relationship did exist, was it the result of the survival of the Protestant work ethic in this former British colonial outpost? This research clearly had no immediate practical value; it was designed to satisfy academic curiosity and to continue a tradition of research in the United States that was largely inspired by Weber's thesis.

An example of applied research comes from a commissioned study conducted in the late 1970s. A developer wished to build houses on a site close to the Melbourne airport. He engaged a firm of architects and planners to assist him. Planning restrictions determined how close houses could be built to the flight paths associated with the runways. This restriction was established in terms of

maximum decibel readings, and was shown as a line on a map down each side of the flight path. The developer was concerned about his ability to sell houses if they were built close to the flight path. Would purchasers be willing to live right up to the legal planning limit? If not, how close would they be willing to live? The firm of architects and planners wanted answers to these questions. The study was done by interviewing residents who were living at different intervals from an adjoining flight path, including some whose houses were built under it before the airport was established there, and before the planning restrictions came into force. The developer would have liked a definite line drawn on the map but, since people's responses to living close to aircraft noise were very varied, this was not possible. Some people appeared to be willing to put up with aircraft noise if the price of the house was attractive. In the end, the developer adopted a conservative position and left some open space adjoining the planning limit.[4]

In the social sciences, research is often a mixture of basic and applied: some stages of a project may have a basic flavour, while other stages may be more applied. For example, a researcher may be commissioned to assist the managers of an organization in changing the organization's culture. After undertaking research to describe the existing culture, the researcher may then proceed to refine and test a particular theory of organizational change. Only when satisfied that the theory is relevant to this particular organization will the researcher proceed to engage in some form of action research that helps the members of the organization bring about the changes desired by management.

Few if any social research projects are exclusively concerned with advancing knowledge for its own sake. While basic research may not be interested in the practical benefits, it can eventually produce such outcomes. Implicitly or explicitly, most social researchers appear to have some social issue or problem in mind when they undertake research. The fundamental question is whether the researcher has the freedom to define the research problem and design the research, or whether someone else has a significant input into this.

3.7 Researcher's Stance

An important choice that all social researchers have to make is what stance to take towards the research process and participants, determining what relationship there will be between the researcher and the researched. Blaikie (2007) has outlined six possible stances.

The traditional 'scientific' stance is that of the *detached observer*. The researcher is regarded as an uninvolved spectator, particularly during the process of data collection. It is argued that a researcher's values and preferences can threaten the objectivity of the research and, hence, the value of the results. Therefore, detachment is a requirement for producing reliable knowledge. This position is still widely advocated in spite of the many criticisms that have been raised against it.

The second position, that of the *empathetic observer*, still aims to achieve this kind of objectivity but insists that it is necessary for researchers to be able to place themselves in the social actors' position. Only by grasping the subjective

Researcher's Stance

Detached observer
Empathetic observer
Faithful reporter
Mediator of languages
Reflective partner
Dialogic facilitator

meanings used by the social actors can their actions be understood. This is commonly referred to as *verstehen* (Weber 1964; Outhwaite 1975).

This second position has developed into a third, the *faithful reporter*, in which the stance is much less detached. The aim is to report a way of life by allowing research participants to 'speak for themselves'. Thus, a researcher's task is to present the social actors' point of view; to do this it may be necessary to become immersed in their way of life. This position is commonly referred to as 'naturalism' and was advocated by sociologists of everyday life (see, for example, Lofland 1967; Blumer 1969; Matza 1969; Denzin 1971; Douglas 1971; and Guba 1978). A researcher is required to study social phenomena in their 'natural' state, to be sensitive to the nature of the social setting, to describe what happens there and how the participants see their own actions and the actions of others. A related requirement is that a researcher 'retains the integrity of the phenomenon'. This means remaining faithful to the phenomenon under investigation by only producing reports in which the social actors can recognize themselves and others. If social actors cannot do this, then the social scientific account must be a distortion of the social actors' world. This process of getting social actors, or research participants, to check the social scientific accounts that have been produced is sometimes referred to as 'member validation' or 'member checks'; it is a major form of validity checking in qualitative research but is not without its difficulties (Garfinkel 1967).

A fourth position, which rejects the idea of detachment, is an extension of the third. In this case, a researcher becomes the *mediator of languages*, between everyday, lay language and social scientific or technical language (Giddens 1976; Gadamer 1989). Studying social life is akin to studying a text, and this involves interpretation on the part of the reader. The researcher actively constructs an account based on the accounts provided by the participants. This process of construction is not neutral; researchers have to invest something of themselves into their account. Social, geographical and historical locations, as well as a researcher's interests and assumptions, have a bearing on the nature of the account produced. Hence, detached objectivity is seen to be impossible as the author's voice will always be present in a researcher's account (Geertz 1988).

A fifth position is associated with critical theory. The researcher is viewed as a *reflective partner* who is committed to the emancipation of the participants from whatever kind of oppression they are experiencing (Habermas 1970, 1972). Following Husserl, Habermas rejected the idea that the world can be conceived of as a universe of facts independent of an 'observer' whose task is to describe them – what he called the 'objectivist illusion'. He accepted the premise that social and cultural reality is already pre-interpreted by the participants as a cultural symbolic meaning system, and that these meanings can change over

time. Therefore, the process of understanding this socially constructed reality is 'dialogic'; it allows individuals to communicate their experiences within a shared framework of cultural meanings. In contrast, the process in the natural sciences is 'monologic'; it is the technical manipulation by a researcher of some aspect of nature. In the latter, a researcher is a 'disengaged observer', who stands in a subject-to-object relationship to the subject matter. In the former, the researcher is a 'reflective partner' whose relationship is that of subject to co-participant (Blaikie 2007: 135–6).

Another version of this fifth position is associated with feminist research and involves *conscious partiality*. Again, the concern is with emancipation, in this case of women. Much more than empathy is involved here. A researcher not only participates in women's struggles but is also expected to be changed by them. This view of research involves the conscientization of both the researcher and the researched (Mies 1983: 126). By conscientization is meant learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality (Freire 1970).

The fourth and fifth positions have now culminated in a sixth, postmodern, view of the role of a researcher. In this case, a researcher is regarded as another actor in the social context being investigated. Rather than being the 'expert', as in the *detached* position, or that of an *empathetic observer* or a *faithful reporter*, the postmodern researcher takes elements from the positions of *mediator of languages*, *reflective partner* and *conscientizer*, and seeks to reduce a researcher's authorial influence on the products of the research by allowing a variety of 'voices' to be expressed. These researchers still rely on their understanding of the situation, but they attempt to minimize their authorial bias by letting the natives speak for themselves as much as possible. The aim is to produce a 'polyphony' of voices rather than a single voice, in order to reduce bias and distortion (Fontana 1994: 214). The emphasis here is on the dialogue between the researcher and the researched. Hence, this position might be described as that of a *dialogic facilitator*.

Clearly, there are incompatibilities between most of these positions, and there is an extensive literature that debates their relative merits. As we shall see in chapter 6, these positions are associated with the four dominant logics of inquiry and the three research paradigms identified by Blaikie and Priest (2017). However, before we leave this discussion, there is a related concept that needs to be discussed, that of *reflexivity*.

The notion of reflexivity is integral to the ethnomethodologist's views on how social actors make their actions and their social world meaningful to themselves and others. Giddens incorporated this idea into his structuration theory as the 'reflexive monitoring' that social actors need to engage in to maintain continuity in their social practices. For Giddens, reflexivity is more than self-consciousness; it involves the active monitoring of the ongoing flow of social life (Giddens 1984: 5).

There is a growing acceptance of the idea that if reflexivity is an integral part of everyday social practices, then it must need to be used by social researchers. Wherever new knowledge is generated through a process of interaction between the researcher and the researched, a social researcher will draw on the same skills that social actors use to make their activities intelligible (Giddens 1976: 157–61).

Recognition of the need for social researchers to be reflexive can be found in the writings of qualitative researchers in general, and ethnographers in particular, as well as among feminist researchers (see, for example, Stanley and Wise 1993; Maynard and Purvis 1994). Hammersley and Atkinson have argued that reflexivity implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 15).

Similarly, Mason (2002) regarded *active reflexivity* as one of the essential features of qualitative research; researchers need to be active and reflexive in the process of generating data rather than being neutral data collectors.

> Qualitative research should involve critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or *active reflexivity*. This means that the researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their 'data'. This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are generating. Instead, they should seek to understand their role in that process. Indeed, the very act of asking oneself difficult questions in the research process is part of the activity of reflexivity. (Mason 2002: 7)

Recognition of the impossibility of detachment as well as the reflexive nature of social research poses some difficult philosophical problems with regard to the status of social scientific knowledge. Part of this dilemma centres on different ideas as to whether objectivity and, therefore, 'true' knowledge are possible. There seems to be a fear that giving up on the possibility of being an objective researcher means that all social research degenerates into the production of competing 'subjective' accounts, the relative merits of which can only be established by political processes. However, Hammersley and Atkinson have argued that a commitment to reflexivity does not imply 'that research is necessarily political, or that it should be political, in the sense of serving particular political causes or practical ends. For us, the primary goal of research is, and must remain, the production of knowledge' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 15). On the other hand, critical theorists and feminist researchers see commitment to the cause of emancipation as an essential part of all social scientific activity. (See Blaikie (2007) for a brief review of these issues, and Hammersley (1992), Guba and Lincoln (2005), and Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) for discussions relevant to social research.)

The researcher's stance has not been included as a research design element as adopting a particular stance is something that occurs independently of the research design. Of course, it is possible that an ideological commitment to a particular stance may have an influence on the research topics that are likely to be entertained, and on other design decisions. Having said this, reflexivity is not

really a matter of choice. All social researchers should be reflexive, regardless of the stance they adopt, and *reflexivity* applies to the process of designing social research as much as to the research process itself.

3.8 Conclusion

This book adopts a different approach to research design than is usually found in research methods texts. In some of these, a distinguishing criterion is used: for example, the degree to which they are experimental (e.g. experimental, quasi-experimental and non-experimental); the role that time plays (e.g. cross-sectional, longitudinal, retrospective); or the kind of data and methods used (e.g. quantitative and qualitative). In others there is no criterion; for example, a common classification includes experiments, social surveys, ethnography and case studies. As we saw early in this chapter, when a mixture of categories like this is used, they are invariably not mutually exclusive; for example, surveys and ethnographic methods can both be used in case studies.

Our approach avoids such labels and focuses on two fundamentals: the primary research design tasks; and the elements within these tasks about which decisions have to be made. By concentrating on these decisions, we are able to avoid the problem of finding a suitable set of research design categories, and concentrate instead on the important core elements of a design. These include: the problem to be investigated; the questions that will make the problem researchable; the logic(s) of inquiry to be used to answer the research questions; methods for making selections from data sources; how to collect or generate data; and how to analyse data to produce the answers.

Just what combination of these decisions turns out to be relevant to a particular research problem and set of research questions can vary considerably. Some combinations of decisions may be more common than others, and some may be unusual compared to a discipline's traditions.

An important choice that underlies all these other decisions is the stance that a researcher adopts towards the research process and the participants. Careful consideration needs to be given to choosing a stance that is consistent with the other research design decisions.

After considering research ethics in the next chapter, and their implications for research design and practice, we will return to a detailed discussion of research questions and the purposes they serve.

3.9 Further Reading

de Vaus, D. A. (2001). *Research Design in Social Research.*

Adopts a very different approach to research design to the one presented here.

de Vaus, D. A. (ed.) (2006). *Research Design.*

A comprehensive set of articles on many aspects of research design from a wide variety of positions.

Flick, U. (2007). *Designing Qualitative Research.*

A brief introduction.

Flick, U. (2015). *Introducing Research Methods.*

Adopts a similar approach to this book.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing Qualitative Research.*

Provides pragmatic, step-by-step guidance for developing and defending proposals for qualitative research.

Mason, J. (2002, 2017). *Qualitative Researching.*

Also adopts a similar approach.

Punch, K. F. (2016). *Developing Effective Research Proposals.*

A concise and practical outline.

Silverman, D. (ed.) (2005). *Doing Qualitative Research.*

A broad coverage of the design, conduct, analysis, writing up, supervision, examination and publishing of postgraduate qualitative research.