Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 15

2

RESEARCH STYLES, ROLES AND CONTEXTS

Chapter overview

Styles of research – qualitative and quantitative research experience
The status and stance of styles of research
How important is being a researcher to you?
Networking: research as market/research as friendship
The search for funds
The research proposal
The experience of qualitative and quantitative research
Research relations in different social settings
Competing research roles
Key points to remember on researcher experience: the researchers role
Summary
Further reading

Just how and why I decided to do such a study [on the elite] may suggest one way in which one's life experiences feed one's intellectual work. (Mills, 1970: 220)

The scientific procedures used by the sociologist imply some specific values that are peculiar to this discipline. One such value is the careful attention to matters that other scholars might consider pedestrian and unworthy of the dignity of being objects of scientific investigation – something one might almost call a democratic focus of interest in the sociological approach. (Berger, 1966: 188)

Sociologists are no more ready than other men [*sic*] to cast a cold eye on their own doings. No more than others are they ready, willing, or able to tell us what they are really doing and to distinguish this firmly from what they *should* be doing. … The historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology as I conceive it, however, would be to *transform* the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level. (Gouldner, 1972, in Seale, 2004: 381–2)

Styles of research – qualitative and quantitative research experience

'Research' encompasses a very broad set of 'styles' and 'methodologies' in the collection of materials or data, and particular methods and substantive issues shift in 'popularity' over time. It can be more 'open' or 'exploratory' in methodological design, or apply strict procedures to 'test' an 'hypothesis'. Research methods can be broadly placed within quantitative or qualitative approaches, and a study may be 'large scale' or 'small scale', short-term or long-term, and may have many or few numbers of those researched (see Silverman, 2000, ch.1). Research practice may also focus on more secondary or documentary sources or deal directly with 'subjects', as in interviewing. Research can take place in one or many locations – some far afield and involving the excitement or inconvenience of travel. Also, if far away, certainly for extended periods, research practice can be associated with loneliness due to the separation from home and colleagues, and the familiarities of place and culture. Such feelings of homesickness for the researcher may even occur if he or she is part of a team in the research setting. Fortunately, today it is much easier to keep in contact with home and the research 'base' by direct phone or the internet, but physical distance can still have an effect. A researcher, of course, may also take part in several types of research procedure and in a variety of settings even within the same research study. The various forms of relationship with those studied may differ in terms of duration and closeness of involvement (some fleeting, as in simple response questionnaires; some perhaps leading to quite deep personal involvement, as in participant observation). How to act according to different research relations can raise questions of 'simple' good manners and respect, through too deeper ethical, possibly legal, and other issues in terms of responsibilities to all those involved. Professional bodies commonly have codes of practice to guide researchers on these issues (e.g. BSA see Seale, 2004). Sociological endeavour can also bring differing types of relationship with other research colleagues – as supervisor or student, employer or employed, and collaborator.

A further distinction associated with the researcher's approach can be made between the scientific principles of the 'positivistic' tradition in the social sciences and the increasingly strong alternative approaches which have challenged the traditional criteria for research practice and investigative methodologies (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a). The traditional or positivistic approach has important implications for the researcher stance and experience. In this view, the investigator is essentially someone who is a technician or a trained, qualified expert in a certain field, who examines a subject with detachment and objectivity. Personal life, attitudes, preferences and feelings are to be 'bracketed off' from research practice. Hypotheses are to be tested by the gathering of 'facts'. The 'ideal' stance is one of

non-emotionality; research is a clinical exercise. The positivist researcher is essentially an observer and measurer of the social 'reality'. In contrast, the 'post-positivist' researches has a very different orientation – to a social world that is seen as fluid, complex, and perhaps ungraspable, with differing notions of truth and multiple 'realities'.

> Post-positivists believe that the traditional gap between the researcher and the researched is one that can (and should) be diminished. … Researchers can act in ways that are: *participatory and collaborative* – rather than research focusing solely *on* a particular group, post-positivist researchers can also work both *for* and *with* participants; and *subjective* – researchers acknowledge being value-bound. They admit to biases that can affect their studies. The question for post-positivist researchers is how to recognize and manage, and in some situations, even-value and use subjectivities endemic to the research process. (O'Leary, 2004: 6–7)

Forms of research

A research project can take many forms: it may include one or more techniques (e.g. interview, questionnaire); it can take place in very different settings and over varying lengths of time; and it can be conducted by one or more researchers.

According to Blaxter, The general purpose of research is to gain information and pursue understanding in a consistent, clear, understandable and rigorous manner. Research can be:

- An investigation of an issue or problem
- Application of a theory or theories
- Testing a specific hypothesis
- Related to policy formation
- Gathering together existing research data, participatory and (see Blaxter et al., 2001: 5)

Blaxter says that numerous types of research or accounts of research share certain 'basic characteristics'; they 'are, or aim to be, planned, cautious, systematic and reliable ways of finding out or deepening understanding' (Blaxter et al., 2001: 5).

Whatever the research stance, qualitative or quantitative in broad approach, a very important point here is the sense of well-being and

security which flows from having a well-defined research role. There is some desire or 'need to position' oneself as a certain kind of researcher and identify with a 'defined way of knowing' – we become attached and socialised in a particular personal orientation and experience (O'Leary, 2004: 8). We tend to feel most comfortable with a certain mode of operating and self-definition, as having perceived 'strengths' as a particular kind of investigator.

The conduct of research is often outlined as a simple chronological process with an emphasis on the gathering of the data by either qualitative and/or quantitative methods. However, the research process is more lengthy and complex than often described:

> Doing sociology is not just about selecting and constructing a data collection technique. On the contrary, it embraces conceptualization of the problem, theoretical debate, specification of research practices, analytic frameworks, and epistemological presuppositions. Data collection is not a self-contained phase in a linear process. Rather, all aspects of the research process are interrelated and all bear on each other. There is no neat linear sequence of events as the idealized research report format would have us believe (i.e. theoretical background, hypothesis, design of research instrument, data collection, test of hypothesis, findings, and implications for theory). However much the idealized form of research design and presentation might be imposed on other forms of research, dialectical critical social research is not conducive to such manipulation. (Harvey, 1990: 208)

On the face of it, 'quantitative' research, at least for some potential practitioners, may appear dry, boring and routinised, and it does have its more mundane tasks. For instance, it can involve the administration of questionnaires, or waiting for the return of envelopes from a mail questionnaire – with any pleasure at receipt and thought of a good response rate tempered by the thought of more data input. Data analysis can seem a mountain to climb when faced with columns and rows of statistical data, formulae and test results to disentangle, requiring seemingly endless days at the computer desk processing the findings. Qualitative work may have the aura of less certainty and seem to be more exciting – the researcher 'in the field' having a different, even more romantic persona than the 'methodological-technicist' in the research room, or the documentary researcher in the archive. Nevertheless, quantitative research strategies do have their pleasures and satisfactions:

> Now I have a real love-hate relationship with quantitative data and statistics. All the numbers, coding, data entry, stats programs, knowing what tests to run, and understanding the meaning of various p-values … can be a nightmare. The pay off, however, is that if this is done with diligence and rigour, you come out with this beautiful thing called 'statistical significance'. You actually get numbers that assess the reliability/validity/generalizability of your findings. (O'Leary, 2004: 114)

Qualitative research, while it can seem initially 'easier' and more interesting, also has its routines and chores, and contains doubts about what may be found. Increasingly, it involves the computer 'lab' as more qualitative research computer programs are adopted. Often qualitative and quantitative research techniques may be used together in a research project, although in varying degrees. Even so, the common view in discussions of research methods is that there is a rigid distinction between practices. On the one hand, there is the immersion of the researcher in the context with a close interaction with the 'subjects', and on the other, there are practices in which there is an 'objective' stance that separates the researcher from those studied. At the most simple, it is usually held, in the one practice there is the reporting of the 'facts', in the other, the information regarding social life emerges in the interactive context of research itself.

At the centre of recent methodological discussion has been a re-evaluation of the epistemological assumptions of research practice, including a fuller and more positive appreciation of the researcher's role, especially, in relation to 'knowledge'. It is increasingly argued that researchers must take into account methodological and epistemological issues regarding how research 'knowledge' is produced in a context. This raises issues surrounding ethics, power, negotiation and the political dimensions of practice. Researchers, it is argued, must be aware of their own 'worldview' and their 'reality' in terms of power relations and the need to make these apparent (O'Leary, 2004: 43).

The status and stance of styles of research

Different types of research in sociology and other social sciences (and various topics of study) have different statuses that can vary over time. For a long time qualitative research methods were seen as less 'scientific'; at most, a lesser tradition. The use of methodological approaches such as ethnography and life histories were regarded as marginal – either more the province of anthropology or merely of interest to formulate some questions or ideas before the 'real job' of research got under way. In short, qualitative methods were seen as not fitting the rigours of scientific principles, such as reliability, validity, and sampling procedures. Major methodological textbooks tended to reflect this marginal status of qualitative methods, either by complete omission or by giving them little space. More recently, this position has changed. There has been a tremendous growth and development of qualitative work, featuring alongside more 'traditional' methods, in major compendiums on methods and issues, and specific volumes are now devoted to a particular method. The 'rise' of qualitative methods has been associated with their growing acceptance and perhaps a greater self-regard and belief by practitioners.

Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 20

Textbook roles

Textbook roles of the researcher tend to depict him or her as applying one or more research technique in a prescribed manner as an 'interviewer', 'participant observer' or a 'surveyor'. However, such guides are not enough – they are inevitably limited accounts of research experience, focusing on one part or parts of the research process (traditionally, usually data collection) and cannot anticipate what can actually take place in the conduct of research. For example, working with other researchers can be very creative, and such collaboration on a project can produce a larger and more sophisticated piece of work, with insights and ideas that the single researcher would not have produced. However, relationships can at times go wrong; they can be frustrating since finding agreement may be difficult. Tensions can arise if it is felt someone in the team is not 'pulling their weight'. Bullying and harassment can even occur, leading to a breakdown in relations and even institutional grievance or other procedures being implemented. Textbook roles tend to be 'idealised' accounts of 'what should happen'.

Usually, in quantitative research the researcher's relationship with those being studied is quite transient or perhaps non-existant. The collection of data may take place over an extended period but the relation with each person is (at most) short-lived, even if a study involves meeting the same people of several occasions, as in longitudinal surveys and before-and-after experiments (Bryman, 1988). Some quantitative methods may not involve direct contact with participants, as in the conduct of mail questionnaires. Surveys and interviews may well be undertaken by other researchers on the team or by individuals (or an organisation) especially employed to undertake the task of gaining information from respondents. Nevertheless, although fleeting contact with respondents is usually a feature of quantitative research, it is important not to overlook the fact that the individual researcher is still involved – the research has a 'biographical experience', with feelings towards the research process, conceptions of the participants, and attitudes towards the material collected. Respondents may be viewed in a certain 'typical' light, the material may have been frustratingly difficult to collect, organise and interpret, and the whole process may have taken more or less time than anticipated. Participant observation and some forms of interview are carried out with intense contact, at least with some of the researched: 'For qualitative researchers, it is only by getting close to their subjects and becoming an insider that they can view the world as a participant in that setting' (Bryman, 1988: 96). In contrast, the traditional stance

of the quantitative researcher is that of an 'outsider looking in on the social world': 'He or she applies a pre-ordained framework on the subjects being investigated and is involved as little as possible in that world' (Bryman, 1988: 96).

There are, of course, other forms of research in which contact with 'subjects' is 'indirect'. Unobtrusive measures, for example, can involve a very wide compass, including the study of formal (public) or informal (personal) records, visual imagery (photographs, videos), internet sources, graffiti and street rubbish (see Lee, 2000; Webb et al, 1966). In documentary research, the original 'subjects' and compilers may no longer be living. But, there is still the daily 'experience' of the researcher, who may well be affected by the sometimes dramatic and disturbing materials accessed and, although now 'distant', may well feel or have a responsibility to those 'voices', who may be no longer alive. Whatever the kind of research, the research has responsibilities, and associated feelings, in terms of a commitment to open research and maintaining the standards of the discipline, including accurate reporting and respect for the interests of participants or others whom the research may affect.

Responsibilities of the researcher

Researchers in all types of research have a number of responsibilities – to participants, colleagues, employer, funding body and to the furtherance of social knowledge. When they start research, sociologists and other researchers begin a set of relationships which entail responsibilities, obligations and feelings:

- There is the commitment to add to knowledge of the social world – this can be interpreted as a general obligation towards social betterment.
- The researcher starts a set of relationships with individuals and groups – the researched and others – that include ethical considerations.
- While committed to complete the research and advance knowledge, the legal and moral rights of others must be considered and respected.
- The obligations to funders, the department, the research team and others should not override the legal and moral rights of those who are being studied.
- The researcher has responsibilities related to how the material is written up, disseminated and its future usage.
- The researcher may well have ongoing, direct obligations towards those who have been studied (see British Sociological Association website and Seale, 2004).

The research method and topic chosen have a bearing on how we wish to be perceived by others, and how we see ourselves and our career hopes. The aspiring researcher is made aware of the areas that are receiving funding, are given higher 'status', or are methodologically and theoretically developing. We also wish our research to be seen as interesting by those in our wider intellectual and research community, and that it is going to be evaluated favourably in terms of our skills, the topicality of the research, or the insights made.

How important is being a researcher to you?

If we accept that research involves our biography, that it is part of our daily life and that we invest in it a great deal of ourselves, then its importance has a number of aspects. We may have chosen a subject or research theme that is close to our hearts, or perhaps it deals with a pressing social issue that concerns us and is in need of investigation. While undertaking research we may make certain sacrifices in terms of time that was already allotted to other activities, and perhaps 'cut corners' on outside personal commitments. The research we engage in can take on a personal importance. We may use it to 'identify' ourselves to others, for instance, as the person who has undertaken a certain kind of research on interesting and possibly important issues. In addition, it can be very flattering to be called an expert on a particular issue to a lay audience, or to be regarded as an authority on a methodology or research area by colleagues, and to be asked to give papers, review books, and evaluate research proposals for national bodies in our chosen field.

Where do research topics come from?

Ideas for research are traditionally seen as arising from other research, from a theoretical formulation, or from social policy issues. But, in fact, it is often unclear why we study a particular topic or research context. Formal reasons may be given in the research report, but there may be more practical reasons for such decisions, such as convenience of a location and time available. We may decide to take a topic according to our previous knowledge, or because of the degree to which we feel more or less 'comfortable' when entering the setting, or asking certain kinds of question. We may simply have researched in the setting before. Perhaps we choose to research a topic or a setting because it may give us some standing in the profession: it is a fashionable area receiving attention from funders; it is likely to attract approval from our colleagues; or the method to be used has become popular or is seen as innovative. Some other research topic may be seen as declining in importance, as not exciting, or the methodology may be seen as rather staid

and unlikely to enable us to find something 'new' (Kleinman and Copp, 1993: 4–6).

The starting point for a research idea can be more connected to the broad life experiences of the researcher – an inquisitiveness or awareness – involving a desire to make connections, to delve deeper into the surrounding world. Less commonly, although found in feminist and some other perspectives, is the notion that the research question derives from or is connected with the biographical experience of the researcher. Thus, as Mills argues, an important aspect of the 'sociological imagination' is the realisation of the connection between 'private troubles' and 'public issues' (Mills, 1970). Reading research texts and reports, therefore, is only part of a wider set of influences (including the availability of funds) on the researcher's decision to investigate a substantive area or use a particular method.

Networking: research as market/research as friendship

An important aspect of research is 'networking' or making contact (by verbal communication, letter, telephone/texting, internet/email) with those in the same field. The idea of networking has sometimes been critically portrayed as ingratiating oneself with others and seeking some personal advantage. Certainly there are instances of such kinds of behaviour in academic life as in other areas. At least for less experienced researchers, there is sometimes a fear of being seen in such a self-interested light. However, networking can also be seen as a much more convivial and sharing activity, where the researchers exchange advice and information, discuss particular findings, or explore aspects of research procedure. Younger researchers in particular should not be afraid of making contacts, even with distinguished academics in the same field. If a response from a contact is not forthcoming or off-putting, then it can be disappointing, but other researchers will be very willing to respond.

Networking, scholarship and communication

The activity of 'networking' has sometimes had rather tarnished image. For some, it is too associated with attempts to create an impression, perhaps as part of touting for jobs, gaining an outlet for publication, seeking to influence, and so on. But 'networking' should not be too readily dismissed. There should be ethical practices in guiding academic relations, but it should not be forgotten that, broadly, disciplines are built on forms of close communication. As Bendix and Roth (1971: 103) argue:

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> As in other disciplines, scholarship in sociology depends on communication concerning the findings and methods of study. In this context every statement made invites consent and helps to define the circle of those who agree, while to some extent marking off those who do not.

Even so, we should not expect relations always to be smooth:

> We are all familiar with the feeling of dismay and anxiety, or with the displays of aggression, when such agreement is not achieved. We are also familiar with the school- or clique-building tendencies that arise from this desire for consensual validation. (Bendix and Roth, 1971: 103)

Bendix and Roth add: 'Like all academic disciplines sociology depends on the existence of a scholarly community. A modern university comprises a congeries of such communities' (Bendix and Roth, 1971: 103).

Contacts can give information that enables a researcher to keep in touch with developments in their area – latest reports, ongoing studies, new methodological practices or techniques, and the existence of relevant groups or centres. Links with other researchers also provide valuable information on more formal outlets for research dissemination, such as journals, edited books planned or forthcoming conferences, research committees in professional associations, and so on. Networking, if defined as contacts with others in the same field for the purpose of discussion on areas of common interest, is not only an essential part of open, useful, stimulating communication but is also the basis of collegiality and often long-term friendship.

The search for funds

The search for funding can be a time-consuming and generally wearying process. Often there is much pressure to gain funding, especially if the researcher is coming to the end of a current research grant, and will soon need further funding to pay the mortgage and weekly bills! Also, there is rising pressure within universities, at least in the UK, to gain funding and to disseminate and publish research findings. Academic promotion and appointments may well depend on research activity, with questions like 'how much research money have you brought into the department?' and 'how many recent publications do you have?' asked of the applicant.

A research grant application may well be in response to a call for proposals by a local or national funding body which wishes for a certain subject area to be researched and which is willing to receive submissions for a small or large grant. Application forms are usually several pages in length and require a detailed outline of the nature and aims of the research, extensive information on costing, and referees who can be contacted. Help for the researcher in filling in the application is variable between academic institutions; advice (on style, organisation, financial detail, and so on) from colleagues who have been successful is often very useful.

The search for funds

The choice of a research area and the possible success in gaining funds is, in part, guided by the current practices of the 'disciplinary and funding community' and how an assessment is made of the importance of a topic and the 'standing' of the theoretical and methodological approaches to employed.

- An area of study may or may not be 'in fashion'; subject areas rise and fall in research 'popularity'. So, a topic or issue or group may no longer be seen as important as it once was, or of pressing theoretical concern and methodological interest.
- It is apparent that methods and theories emerge or re-emerge and develop 'a following' as they are taken up by leading writers, and in established or new journals, book series, academic groupings and conferences.
- There are the imperatives of public policy which affect sponsoring organisations that may be placing funds for research on some areas, issues and groups according to public or government concerns. A research area or type of research may not attract funds, since other, 'high-profile' areas are considered more 'worthy' of attention.

To work hard on a piece of research and be committed to exploring a set of issues but to experience difficulties in finding funding can be frustrating. It is a knock also to self-esteem, and it may feel at times that personal enthusiasm and energy may have been misplaced if it appears your area is not seen as important. Of course, all researchers, no doubt, feel that their area is central to the discipline and perhaps in some wider societal terms! However, there are heartening stories of researchers whose field was neglected of funds until it suddenly rose to prominence due to media and government attention, and was recognised as a topical and important area.

Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 26

The research proposal

What is sometimes overlooked in guides to research practice for quantitative and qualitative methods is the potentially long period in which a proposal is considered and prepared. For example, a less experienced researcher or a PhD student researcher, may well have to take several months formulating a research proposal. As Leonard advises:

> If you work in the humanities and social sciences … you will spend a lot of time initially defining and refining your topic, deciding the appropriate methodology to use, finding sources and doing fieldwork on your own. You may feel even more isolated and unsupported, culture shocked and in limbo (though this is changing). Even your supervisor's interests may soon be substantially different from your own, despite it initially looking as if you have a lot in common. Little is organized for you outside the taught courses in the first year. There is no timetable, no set reading, and little feedback unless you seek it. Academic interaction in seminars and conferences can be competitive and down-putting, especially if you lack middle class heterosexual confidence. (Leonard, 2001: 63)

For the experienced researcher, a proposed piece of research may have a 'long history' deriving from his or her established research interests and previous studies as well as more recent developments in the field. But, the proposal still has to be 'shaped' to meet funding criteria. Although, funding bodies often give tight deadlines, they do usually provide much background information on a particular research 'initiative' in their call for proposals, including lengthy guidelines and detailed forms which have to be completed. As with PhD proposals, internal university procedures will have to be met for approval, including scrutiny by ethics committees (and in relation to health research, external ethical approval) (see Punch, 2000).

Inevitably, compiling the details for the research proposal and making it fit the funding guidelines needs a great deal of energy. Meanwhile, this often has to be done while engaged in other research and/or teaching commitments. The document will have to be checked against the guidelines for applicants, costings and references scrutinised, and a final proofreading accomplished. Then there is the wait for the response from the funding body with a further delay if the proposal is shortlisted. Detailed feedback is usually now given by research bodies, which may include the comments of several referees (on areas such as 'originality', 'value for money' and 'communication plans'). Failing to gain a grant after such an effort can be quite a personal blow. As the applicant, you may not agree with all the comments, but generally you will probably see areas where the application could have been strengthened. It may well be that what you have offered is a topic or approach that, on reflection, is not quite as central as you thought to those required in the call for research applications. You may well have good support from your department, a very interesting topic and are very committed to the research, but you

Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 27

have written what you wish to research rather than fitting the wishes of the funding body. Constructing research proposals is something of an 'art' and success depends upon the skill in meeting the criteria laid out. Evidence of past success in obtaining funding and completing research by you or the team, especially for large grants, can be a factor in receiving further monies.

The experience of qualitative and quantitative research

The 'experiential' aspects of research do not only occur in qualitative studies – the researcher has a life and feelings, and interacts with others when also engaged in more quantitative research! This is not to deny differences between methods and methodological practice. For example, Bryman (1988) makes a useful set of distinctions between 'quantity' and 'quality' in social research, which has a bearing on the research experience. He gives a number of key differences between quantitative and qualitative research traditions, including: the role of researcher can be 'preparatory' or a means to explore the interpretations of actors; the relation between the researcher and research is different in terms of closeness; the researcher is either an 'outsider' or 'insider' in relation to the researched, and 'social reality' is conceived as 'static and imposed or socially constructed by individuals' (Bryman, 1988: 94). However, we can add that these differences can be seen as more overlapping in practice than simply 'polar', and, of course, often a research project employs a range of research methods.

Questions concerning research relations in 'quantitative' methods arose in my research in a Welsh valley that used a survey alongside other techniques. A mail questionnaire was sent out with a covering letter and free post reply envelope. Questions were asked on personal background (occupation, income, length of residence) and open questions on 'outlook' on the valley's future. The response rate was much better than expected and only a few replies were poorly completed, so I felt some relief that an initial hurdle had been overcome. Unfortunately, in at least one case the addressee had died and a near relative kindly informed me of the fact. I felt grateful for local people taking the time to fill in the questionnaire, and fact some responsibility to them to 'do my best' with the material. I became more aware of their possible expectations of the research in filling in responses. Pressure of time to overcome the next hurdles – the collation and analysis of the materials, and how it related to previous findings – soon began to bear down on my thoughts.

Innovation in research

For those who have undertaken successfully qualitative or quantitative research previously there is the confidence that comes with repetition, of

having tried or considered alternatives before, of knowing more about comparable research and similar procedures. There is also likely to be a supportive network of colleagues of equal standing whose expertise can be drawn on and who have been part of ongoing discussions and exchanges of experiences for a number of years. Of course, the acquisition of experience and 'competence' in ways of conducting research can have its drawbacks. A degree of inflexibility may result by believing that there is simply a 'tried and tested' and 'only' way of doing things, and by being less open to innovation in new methodological or theoretical approaches. There can be an underlying feeling of unease when alternative procedures are offered. The researcher may have pioneered a procedure or at least have some personal commitment to it. Now it may be considered out of date or its basis questioned where it was once seen as 'cutting edge'. The experienced researcher may feel uncomfortable branching into a new procedure or area of study that is unfamiliar and in which competence and standing has to be re-established. Instead of being excited by something new, it may be 'galling' to have a new procedure or analytical slant offered by someone who is deemed a relative newcomer. Of course, such feelings should not arise, but the research environment is as competitive as any other occupational ladder. For the less experienced researcher and postgraduate, there is a possible difficulty where new innovations in methods or techniques may be resisted or doubted by established researchers, including research supervisors.

Research relations in different social settings

There are innumerable research settings and a wide variation in research relations. The research participants may be in 'closed' or 'open settings' according to the degree to which they can move from place to place and make 'life choices'. For example, the study of prisoners brings particular difficulties for research practice and relations, as Cohen and Taylor found in their work on maximum security prisoners:

> While there might be certain identifications between us and the prisoners, there are also many areas of disjunction. It was initially not very easy, for example, to feel relaxed in a room which contained a number of supposedly dangerous and volatile criminals. We were rarely conscious of any danger – although the prisoners correctly sensed that one of our colleagues was so nervous during the lecture period that he failed to appear for his subsequent classes. As one member remarked, 'How does it feel teaching people you've read so much about?' (Cohen and Taylor, 1972: 33; see also Cohen and Taylor, 1978)

Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 29

Expectations of the researcher

Contacts in research (interviewees, informants) can put the 'researcher' into several roles or categories. As an interviewee, people have some general knowledge about 'research' from television or personal experience (e.g. job interviews) which may help or hinder a study. They may have certain expectations of the researcher as an 'academic', as an 'intellectual', as a 'teacher', or as a 'writer-reporter', as someone taking their view to form part of book, article or report. Any of these forms may lead to some particular shaping, perhaps by a caution in individual's responses. other individuals may relish by treating individuals' responses with caution. other individuals may relish the chance to be 'consulted' and may be excited by the fact that they are making a (published) contribution. In a related way, there are various common conceptions of what 'research' is and its purpose and use. The researcher has to feel confident in the roles adopted and perceived by others, and reassured that they reflect what is intended as part of the research.

There are certain expectations by researchers and others regarding the appropriate feelings to hold towards particular kinds of research participant and setting. Also, while the researcher brings unique experience and personality, and differing gender, class, sexual and other aspects of social background (see Yow, 2005: Ch. 6), the way the researcher is treated by those in the research context varies according to certain assumptions and perceptions. Easterday et al. (1982) draw attention to the 'specific problems of being a female field researcher in relation to general methodological issues, such as the establishment and maintenance of rapport and research relationships' (Easterday et al., 1982: 62). They record their reflections on a very broad range of their studies, including in 'an art museum, an embalming school, a funeral parlour, a medical team in a nursing home, a military photography programme, a morgue, a newspaper, two social service agencies, a stock brokerage office, a television station and a university film-making programme'. From these studies, they construct a 'typology of sex roles and power', including the 'Fraternity', 'Hustling', the 'Go-fer', the 'Mascot' and the 'Father – Daughter' type (Easterday et al., 1982: 62–5). For example: 'One of the problems a young single female researcher has to deal with is "hustling". Particularly in male-dominated settings where the observer is talking to one male at a time ... the male – female games come early to the fore' (Easterday et al. 1982: 64). Another type, is the 'Go-fer', which is found where the female researcher may be expected to take the role of 'go-fer' – fetching this or that as in clerical errands assumed 'a typical role for the woman, to which men can easily relate'.

Of further interest is the 'Father – Daughter' type of research relationship which combines age, gender and power:

> Older males in a setting may interact with a young female researcher in a manner we describe as paternalistic. Given the legitimacy of traditional sex role relationships, the father – daughter relationship offers older males – threatened by young women or unable to interact with young women as peers – a safe, predefined interactional context. (Easterday et al., 1982: 65)

The lesson to draw from Easterday et al.'s typology is to be aware of the role expectations that may result from your status, gender and other social dimensions (see Brewer, 2000: 99–101). In addition, the investigator needs to be cognisant of the negotiations and challenges that may be necessary to carry out the work without feeling compromised, uncomfortable or bullied. Researchers need to make clear their own position and intent in the research role, while also being aware of the expectations of the research group and an organisation's policies on staff relations.

Competing research roles

The researcher in organisations

A feature of research may well be how an organisation fits the researcher into its existing pattern of relationships or role. The researcher may find him or herself moving or caught between the role(s) given or expected by the organisation and those of a researcher, while also trying to fit in and gain knowledge of the organisational routines and personnel. For example, Hey undertook a 'small-scale participant observation study conducted in two city schools in the mid-late 1980s'. She researched in a 'large mixed comprehensive in a middle-class suburb' and a smaller comprehensive within a mainly working-class area nearby. She says that aside from her 'inexperience in conducting research', her 'field relations' 'were also complicated by other factors: the circumstances of the school, the nature of the project (privileging girls) as well as by the choice of fieldwork methods (participant observation)'. As she quotes from early fieldnotes:

> Felt foolish 'cos I couldn't recollect the names of all the staff with whom I'd just been liaising. I kept calling Mrs. Harris, Mrs Taylor, *felt just like a new girl*, overwhelmed by the bureaucratic nightmares that schools are (to newcomers). Not only do you have to remember the [layout of] buildings but also: staff names; statuses; subjects; timetables; timings; routines; protocols and facilities. (Hey, 2002: 68–9)

The researcher can be engaged in a number of 'competing' roles during the course of research – student, fund-raiser, author, 'confidante' or disseminator – which may create some tensions or 'role-strain'. For some researchers the overlap between 'formal' and 'informal' roles in research may be intentional, as in feminist and some other research, where the participant is conceived as less of an 'informant', 'respondent' or 'subject' and more as a collaborator, friend or helper in the research. But, 'competing' or 'multiple' roles can lead to certain problems. For instance, an important difficulty can arise between the investigator as a researcher and as a practitioner. Moch relates her concerns around being a researcher and also a nurse:

> My experience as a researcher in qualitative research has been a source of great reflection, inner struggle, and ethical questioning. Some of the difficulty occurred because of my being a nurse as well as a researcher. At times, I wondered if I was first a nurse and then a researcher or first a researcher and then a nurse. Sometimes, the difficulty arose because of my experience as a mother, wife, midlife woman, or professor. In other words, the researcher experience and all the reflection and struggle happened, in part, because of who I am. And I don't want to change that. (Moch, 2000a: 7)

Moch's research reveals the difficulties of being in two roles – a researcher and practitioner – to such an extent that the two meld together as equal partners as 'researcher-practitioner' (Moch, 2000a: 9). Similar 'blurring' of roles occurs more frequently in research than is perhaps realised. Some important issues can arise. For example, does the researcher give information which might help (for instance) the health of the researched? If so, how and when is this done? How are the shifts in role possible, justifiable and understandable to the 'researched patient'? Valerie Yow, an oral historian' adds a further note of caution regarding 'role confusion' in relation to interviewing. We expect to 'get on' with our interviewers, share some similar assumptions and for the interview to be a 'success', but in her view:

> The interviewer must keep in mind that a professional relationship is not a friendship and make that clear, if need be, to the narrator. When the interviewer has a negative reaction to what the narrator is saying or is distracted by some interpersonal chemistry, he or she must consciously keep in mind the purpose of the interview. (Yow, 2005: 179)

In my own community research, I made friends with a number of 'interviewees', exchanging Christmas cards, making phone calls to see how they were, and so on, as well as asking for 'news of the valley'. I often found during the research that I was in various roles at different times, or even in simultaneous roles: as researcher seeking information, as an interested historian with a concern for the locality and its social issues, as a friend exchanging experiences of family and other relationships, or as a confidant

Roberts-3518-Chapter-02.qxd 1/11/2007 7:32 PM Page 32

being told of 'local gossip'. Other perhaps more formal or distant roles emerged: as guest in a house or club, as a visiting speaker to a regular group meeting, as a paying guest in a bed and breakfast establishment, as a party member sharing the same political commitments, as an academic discussing the area with other academics (sometimes in the research context itself), among others. The 'self-examination' of my research roles was not debilitating. I began to gain a confidence in my own research abilities, in the purpose of the research, and feel a sense of achievement – while under severe time constraints and outside pressures.

Key points to remember on researcher experience: the researcher's role

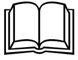
Discussions on the role of the researcher have until recently neglected the 'inner' or 'emotional' aspects of 'researcher experience':

- The researcher's role is a complex, multifaceted one, which can contain various tensions (e.g. between researcher and practitioner, or researcher as 'data gatherer' and as a 'friend').
- The researcher's own life is involved in the research process and affects the experience of research.
- The researcher may place – some say should place – him or herself directly in the research rather than portray themselves as someone neutral or detached.
- The researcher will be involved in a range of different relationships during the course of research, with those researched, collaborators and colleagues, funders, research audience and non-research associations.
- To be identified as a 'researcher' can be important for individual identity, academic or social status, and self-respect.

Summary

There are many different styles and types of research project that may comprise a mixture of quantitative and qualitative work. The conduct of research involves the investigator's life, including a 'personal' investment. Different styles or types of research and research topic have a differing status depending on the current concerns of the discipline and the 'fashion' for certain subjects and issues, which may well reflect wider social priorities. Networking can give important support to the researcher, for example, in providing guidance, encouragement and personal support as well as an outlet to 'sound out' ideas.

Further reading



There are a number of collections of personal accounts of sociological research work and careers, often by leading sociologists. For the 'classic' account, see P.E. Hammond (ed.) (1964) *Sociologists at Work: Essays on the Craft of Social Research* (London: Basic Books). Also very interesting for research practice and careers are: C. Bell and S. Encel (eds) (1978) *Inside the Whale: Ten Personal Accounts of Social Research* (Oxford: Pergamon Press); I.L. Horowitz (ed.) (1970) *Sociological Self Images: A Collective Portrait* (Oxford: Pergamon Press); M.W. Riley (ed.) (1988) *Sociological Lives* (London: Sage); and N. Hallowell et al. (eds) (2005) *Reflections on Research* (Maidenhead: Open University Press). For discussions of the researcher's own biography and involvement in relations with the researched, see *Sociology* (journal) (1993) Special Issue: 'Biography and Autobiography in Sociology', 27 (1). In searching for funds the websites of major funding bodies give detailed advice on new project areas and how to apply (including proposal forms and how they should be completed), for example for the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) see http://esrcsocietytoday. ac.uk.