# 1

# The Idea
# of Research

## Chapter objectives

This chapter will help you to:

- Understand the characteristics of the concept of research.
- Appreciate the diversity of categories into which we can divide research.
- Review the ways in which research is supported by organizations and sponsors.

## → Terms used

The following terms are discussed in this chapter: accumulation; action research; applied research; autobiographical research; basic research; case study research; commissioned research; correlational research; description; evaluation research; explanation; generalization; insider research; life history research; outsider research; policy-linked research; prediction; pure research; research; research tender; social research; sponsored research; theory; understanding; validation; verification.

## The characteristics of research

As this book is about **research**, it seems appropriate that we should devote the first chapter to an analysis of the nature of research, and of the ways in which the term is used. 'Research' is not an exclusively academic word. We sometimes employ it in ordinary language, to refer to the collection of information. If we are planning a visit overseas, we might say that we are 'going to research the cheapest flights', for example. Used in this way, the word carries not only the implication of collecting information, but also of collecting that information in a particular way. It suggests for example, that we do not intend to make a quick, random search of all flights, but rather a detailed and systematic investigation of the options available to us. The term 'research' can also be applied in everyday language, to a wide range of contexts and subjects. It is not limited to one or two areas. Thus, in an everyday sense, research is about collecting information in a systematic manner, on a range of topics.

Fortunately perhaps, this term is used in exactly the same sense in academic or scientific enquiry, although it does have one or two additional connotations. In its most basic sense, research involves collecting information on something, and thus adding to our overall knowledge. Such additional information usually concerns an area which is less well understood or documented, and there are many such areas within social science and education. I have a number of friends who all work in different jobs, but I have little detailed knowledge of their working lives. Equally, they probably do not know very much about how I spend my working day. Systematic research could provide descriptions of the working lives of different professions, and so add to our knowledge of the workplace.

However, research goes beyond providing information in order to produce an accurate **description** of a place or social situation. It takes the key features of that description, and tries to understand why these exist. For example, many people would say that stress is a common feature of the workplace today. However, the causes of that stress may be diverse and complex, and may very well be interlinked themselves with many other factors. A researcher would try to take the initial description of the workplace, and then attempt to understand the mechanisms by which stress is produced in some members of the workforce. In other words, the researcher would try to produce an **explanation**. Such explanations may not be perfect, and they may not fit all comparable situations, but they can help us to understand something of the way in which situations arise in society. In a recent study, Tonnelat (2008) investigated the lives of homeless people in a small community on the outskirts of Paris. On one level,

he produced a description of their lives, and the makeshift accommodation which they had created for themselves. However, he went further than that, in trying to analyse their relationships with the permanent residents of the area, the police, and the city housing department. He interviewed the people themselves, and got to know them as individuals. In so doing he started to develop an **understanding** of their lives, and an explanation of the factors which affected them. In other words, he began to create a **theory** related to the lives of homeless people living on the margins of a large conurbation.

One of the advantages of research such as this, is that not only does it help us to understand a situation which is happening now, but it also gives us an idea of how a similar situation might develop in the future. So, for example, if unemployment and homelessness increased in the future, and people were forced to live in such circumstances, we would understand something of the circumstances which affected their lives. Research, therefore, enables us not only to understand something of present events, but also to **predict** future events. Moreover, even though this study applied only to one specific community in one large city, it may well be that some aspects of the conclusions would also apply to homeless people living in London or San Francisco. Research as a result provides us with an opportunity to **generalize** our findings and understand other similar situations.

Another feature of research is that it seldom takes place in isolation. One research study can build upon the insights of other research studies. Researchers exist in a community, and share their findings with each other, in order that we can gradually learn more about the world. Research is thus incremental and **accumulative**. More than that, however, researchers do not simply take for granted the conclusions drawn by other researchers. They subject their findings to scrutiny; they examine the rigour of the research methods which they have used; and they analyse carefully the logic by which they have drawn their conclusions. In other words, they will **validate** or **verify** previous research studies or theories.

## Categorizing research

Much research is concerned with trying to develop a better understanding of the functioning of the world or of human beings. In such cases the research is less concerned with particular contexts or situations, and more with trying to understand the basic principles which are operating and which will apply in many different situations. This kind of research is often termed **pure** or **basic** research. It usually takes place within a specific subject discipline,

and uses a clearly-defined range of concepts. Sometimes pure research is concerned with testing or validating previously-established theories, while on other occasions it will try itself to develop new theories. Within the sphere of education studies for example, pure research usually takes place within one of the disciplines which contributes to educational thought. For instance, pure research might be concerned with adding to our understanding of the cognitive processes which affect memory. Such research within psychology could be useful in many areas of life, but would have a clear application to education and to teaching strategies. If we can understand better the way in which children will memorize facts and principles, then this might affect the manner in which we present curricular materials in the classroom. Pure research therefore will often have implications for professional practice in activities connected with the social sciences, and can also affect the way in which policies are developed both locally and nationally.

On the other hand, some research sets out from the first instance to address a specific issue or problem rather than to add to our knowledge in a general way. Research which is related to a practical situation, perhaps to try to resolve a practical issue, is termed **applied research**. A great deal of educational research is actually applied research, since there is often a great need to resolve pragmatic issues in the process of teaching. Educational managers will want to know how best to innovate in curriculum delivery, and how to provide interesting and informative types of professional development for their staff. Teachers will want to know how to handle difficult and challenging classes, and how to enhance their career potential. Educational policy makers will want to know how best to adapt the curriculum in order to make students more employable. The list could go on and on. Recently Boyd (2008) and a team of colleagues from five different universities in the United States explored the range of teacher training programmes available in New York City. Perhaps interestingly, given the diversity and size of the city, they found a considerable degree of uniformity in the programmes available. They then went on to analyse the ways in which more specialist approaches could be introduced in order to meet specific needs. This is an example of applied research.

Moreover, there is sometimes a clear interaction between pure and applied research. The latter can on occasion shed light on a more fundamental research issue which is widely generalizable, while pure research can suggest ways of addressing practical problems. The distinction between these two broad areas of research, while not always clear-cut, can provide a useful way of thinking about the activity and purposes of research.

A very broad term which is used a great deal in the human sciences is **social research**. This wide-ranging term is used to include all areas of

research which are focused upon the human condition, and the ways in which human beings behave and interact with each other. As we shall see in some examples, this could involve investigating the lives of African villagers or the way undergraduates respond to a new approach to medical training. Social research can encompass a wide variety of different subject areas and contexts. For example, it might involve researching the way human beings interact in industrial organizations, in religious communities, in schools or colleges, or in leisure situations or prisons. There is really no situation in which human beings interact which cannot be subjected to social research. Moreover, social research ranges across a number of different academic disciplines besides sociology, which is in a sense its 'parent' discipline. Methods of social research are employed in psychology, social psychology, religious studies, management studies, education and health studies, to name but a few. As social research embraces the disciplines of both sociology and psychology, it interests itself not only in the way people behave in groups, but also in the way in which individuals will think in social situations. For example, a social research study could investigate the way groups of people interact in a religious community, but also the social influences upon individuals in such a situation, and the way these influences affect their individual cognitive processes.

Another interesting feature of social research is that the key methods employed will tend to be the same whether these are used in, say, a school or a large industrial company. While a certain amount of information can be gleaned by observing human behaviour, in order to gain detailed insights into the reasons why people behave in the ways they do, we will usually need either to ask them questions or discuss issues with them. Hence different types of questionnaire or of interview procedure tend to be the most widely-used approach. These methods exist in a number of different variants, depending upon the circumstances, but all involve the researcher trying to peer into the human psyche, and to understand something of the background to human behaviour.

An important feature of social research, and one which to a degree distinguishes it from research in the physical sciences such as physics and chemistry, is that social researchers will spend a good deal of their time reflecting upon the methods that they use. Social research methods are not taken as a 'given' within social research. Researchers are very conscious that their mere presence in a situation can affect the behaviour of their respondents. When a researcher enters a school classroom to observe a lesson, or to talk to some of the students, then the dynamics of the classroom are almost inevitably altered. The students and teacher are conscious that a stranger has entered their social milieu, and that they are being 'watched'. Besides the very fact

that a new person has entered the social setting, other variables can affect the social responses. Whether questions are asked in an individual setting, or in a group situation; and whether interviews are conducted in a familiar or strange situation, may have a considerable influence on the research respondents.

> **[?] Questions to ask**
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> One of the difficulties for the newcomer to research is the wide range of terminology, and the fact that terms will often seem to overlap. Different writers may use different terms to refer to the same broad idea. For example, 'social research', 'sociological research', and 'social science research' may be used almost synonymously. Why is this? The answer probably lies in the diversity of subject disciplines which are employed in social research.

Within the broad area of applied research, there are a number of different strategies employed. In recent years, one approach which is becoming more widespread is that of **action research**. Whereas traditional research usually gives pre-eminence to the role of the researcher in planning and designing the research process, action research places much more emphasis upon those who are providing the data to become involved in the research process. Action research concentrates on the exploration and resolution of practical problems and issues, either in the workplace or within community settings. It tends to involve the researcher working in partnership with those who would like to see a resolution of the problem in question. Action research is at the same time a more democratic activity, and also significantly more empowering for those who are experiencing the issue or problem.

Action research typically involves a cyclical process of research followed by action in relation to the problem being investigated, followed by more research. The cycle will start with an evaluation of the problem, involving the joint efforts of the researcher and the participants. Typical issues addressed by an action research approach could be a problem with some aspect of production in a factory, difficulties with an aspect of curriculum delivery in a school, or issues concerning the availability of resources within a community. The evaluation is followed by the design of initial data collection, and the subsequent analysis of those data. The researcher and participants

will then reflect upon the analysis, and take appropriate action to improve the situation being researched. There is then a phase of reflection upon the outcomes of that action. Next a plan is drawn up for further data collection which, after subsequent analysis, results in further action and later reflection. This logical process may be repeated in principle any number of times, although there are clear practical limitations to extending it too far. At some point there would have to be a joint decision that a reasonable degree of progress had been made in the resolution of an issue. This combination of research with practical action has generated many research studies in recent years.

Nemeroff (2008) used a variant of action research called 'sustained dialogue' in encouraging a group of village leaders in South Africa to plan development strategies for their community. Instead of seeing rural development as a series of goals, the strategy encouraged them to think of development as a process, in which continually discussing, acting and reflecting were arguably more important than a concern with targets at some point in the future.

The interaction between a researcher and a respondent can be particularly significant in situations where data are collected on a one-to-one basis, as is often the case in **life history research**. At first sight, life history studies appear to contravene some of the key principles of social research. They involve, for example, the collection of data from a single individual, or at the very least, a small sample of individuals. This apparently makes it very difficult to formulate general statements which might be applicable in a variety of situations. Life history research attempts to reconstruct significant features of the lives of people, and thus to understand something of the way in which their lives have been affected by the events of the time. It is, however, essentially a different process from the type of research where one collects data from a broad sample of individuals and then seeks to develop a general theory based on those data.

Some social research, particularly survey research or research seeking to collect and analyse numerical data, attempts to be as objective as possible in the research process. There appears to be a danger in life history research of an inherent subjectivity from the beginning. In a close interaction between two people, respondents will clearly select those aspects of their lives which they wish to reveal and discuss, and on the other hand, researchers will also be selective in choosing the elements of that life which they will incorporate in the final research study. This appears to carry the risk of a level of subjectivity which would make it difficult to see a single life in a broader context.

UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH PROCESS

> **?**   **Questions to ask**
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> When we consider the subject matter of 'life history' research, it is reasonably clear what we mean by a 'life' in terms of the existence of a single person. However, the term 'history' is more problematic. It could indicate the principal chronological events of a person's life, such as their education, the main features of their employment history, and their main achievements. On the other hand, the same term could indicate an attempt to evaluate the main events of an individual's life in terms of the key social, economic and political factors operating during their existence. This would be a much more complex task. Important questions for this approach thus become:
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> How are we intending to define 'history' within this research approach?
> What are the key aims of life history research?
> When we write a life history, what kind of account will we produce?

The lives of some individuals will be more intrinsically interesting that those of others. This might be because they are important people who have been participants in major events. However, the real interest of an individual's life lies not in whether they have been apparently significant people, but in the manner in which they have interacted with the social influences of the day. For example, the life of a school teacher may not, on the face of it, appear to be particularly interesting, but by considering the evolution of social issues in society, that life becomes more interesting. In the 1960s it was still relatively common to find corporal punishment, including the use of the cane, in English schools. This was generally accepted by parents, teachers and pupils as an acceptable situation. In the intervening forty to fifty years however, this situation has gradually changed. Whereas society may still expect teachers to keep order in schools, and to discipline pupils, teachers are expected to achieve this in ways other than physical punishment. This change is but one feature of many such changes in society during this period. Schools reflect the changing nature of society, and the lives of teachers will change accordingly.

The impact of the widespread use of computers and access to the internet has had a dramatic effect on the working lives of many people. Large numbers of people now have access to a range of knowledge which prior to the advent of the internet was not readily available. A consequence of this is that members of the public are able to challenge the knowledge,

expertise and judgement of professionals in a way which was previously impossible. When we go to see our doctor for example, we can prepare for the visit by consulting a range of internet medical advice centres. The internet has thus resulted in what we might term the democratization of knowledge.

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### Points to consider

In a democracy everyone has, in principle, an influence on and access to political power. In a postmodern society people will have access to knowledge, including that resulting from research. This is empowering in that individuals can access research findings directly, rather than asking for them to be interpreted by others.

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The localization of specialist knowledge with a few professionals in various fields has been partially replaced by the general availability of such knowledge. Inevitably this has lead to something of a challenge to professionals, who must now learn to relate to a much better informed client group. This is of course, only one way in which the advent of computers has transformed working and social life. However, when conducting life history research it is interesting to relate life course events to the types of social and technological transformation brought about by computerization. In this way, we can see a single life set within the context of various changes in society.

Finally, it is also interesting to explore life histories in terms of the changes in value systems which occur in society. The Second World War had an enormous effect on European society. People of all social classes, cultures and countries mixed together in a way which had not tended to happen previously. In the immediate post-war period as a result, there was a reluctance to return to the previous, rather rigidly-defined social order, and the consequence was a much freer, less formal society, which evolved ultimately into the liberalization of the 1960s. People who lived through some of these changes experienced a considerable social transition, and it would be interesting to examine the changes in their lives on a micro level together with the broader transformation of society.

Life history research can use a variety of data including, for example, documents, but the primary method remains the in-depth interview. The advantage

of the interview is that it enables a researcher to examine the nuances of the life being discussed, and to explore connections with the kind of broader societal changes mentioned above. Some researchers have used other methods, including encouraging respondents to write an account of their life. Such autobiographical accounts do not provide an opportunity for the kind of interaction available within interview research, but have perhaps the advantage of allowing the respondent to produce a more thoughtful and considered reflection. May (2008) collected written accounts from mothers who were either lone parents or contemplating divorce. She argued that in an interview situation respondents are able to present a broader range of views about ethically-complex issues because they have the opportunity to comment on, revise and present the subtleties of different viewpoints. On the other hand, in producing written accounts, there may be a tendency for respondents to adhere to views which reflect accepted social norms, as they are aware that they will not have the opportunity to amend or discuss their accounts. It is possible to use the term '**autobiographical research**' to describe the approach of using personal accounts separately analysed by a researcher. Sometimes, it is possible for researchers to write an autobiographical account and to analyse the account themselves, although this poses considerable problems in terms of assuring methodological rigour.

Among the large number of research studies involving autobiography, could be mentioned Delorme et al. (2003), who studied accounts by young people of when they started smoking, and Furman et al. (2007), who explored the use of poems as autobiographical data. In addition, Leskelä-Kärki (2008) evaluated the ways in which different types of written material, including fictional and autobiographical materials, could in principle be analysed.

The use of very small samples in life history research provides a connection with the broad area of **case study research**. In some ways this is both an easy and a difficult area of research to define. It is quite literally a research study of an individual case of something, an individual instance or example. The cases researched might be as varied as a single person, a classroom, an organization, a small community or social group, a town, or a hospital ward. Whatever is selected the case will usually be definable by precise geographical, physical or social boundaries, so that there is relatively little doubt as to what or who is part of the case, and what is excluded. Case studies can be very small, consisting of just one or two people for example, or could consist of a relatively large social grouping. Such variation can lead to some areas of potential confusion.

> ### Points to consider
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> All social science research will have to select a topic for study. Whether a large scale survey is envisaged, or whether the sample for the research is very small, all research studies must inevitably focus upon a particular subject or issue or topic. One might say that the research has to focus upon a case as the object of the study. In other words, it is at least arguable that case study research is simply a different way of describing research which focuses upon a particular topic. One might, for example, plan a case study of an individual school classroom, while another researcher may plan an ethnographic study of a school classroom. It is interesting to reflect on whether these two are intrinsically different.

Perhaps one way of resolving the issue is to consider the types of data collection methods used. Within case study research one can normally use any method of data collection or analysis which is appropriate to the case being studied. It is normally less likely that such methods would include a statistical approach, but this is still perfectly possible. Other research approaches, however, would tend to specialize in terms of data collection and analysis. One could use this as a way of resolving the above issue to some extent.

Larger case studies may also sometimes be regarded as being composed of a number of small studies. A researcher may be investigating a single school as an example of a major case study, while at the same time being interested in, say, the functioning of the senior management team and the social interactions of the staffroom as two separate smaller case studies. It is worth noting here also that the term 'case study' can refer both to the overall research approach and also to the finished product or account of such a study. Thus one might logically speak of either 'doing' a case study, or 'reading' a case study.

Sometimes a case study will be conducted by an external researcher who, prior to the research, was unfamiliar with the specific social situation of the case. On the other hand, case study research may be conducted by a researcher who is, de facto, a member of the case study context and has a social role within that group. Both types of approach have their advantages and disadvantages. In the former category, one might be a professional university researcher who obtains permission, or who is asked, to conduct research into an individual high school and the level of parental involvement within it. Alternatively, the researcher might be a teacher within the school who is researching parental involvement as the subject matter for a research

thesis. This distinction highlights two broad categories of research which are often known as **outsider research** and **insider research**.

Outsider research is representative generally of a traditional research model, of the researcher acting externally to the research context, and looking in at it, in an objective and scientific way. Such research tends to assume that it is possible to measure phenomena in a relatively clear and precise manner, and that the researcher can remain to some extent detached and removed from the research context. An outsider researcher may of course gradually become more involved in the research context, and develop a relationship with the respondents. This can happen in various forms of case study research. One of the traditional difficulties of outsider researchers is that they are not generally aware of the subtleties of the research environment which they are investigating. They may not appreciate some of the relationships between respondents, and hence may remain unaware of many of the nuances of the subject they are researching. On the positive side, they can to some extent stand back from the research and explore issues in a dispassionate and balanced manner.

The advantages and disadvantages of insider research are to a large extent the opposite of outsider research. The insider will tend to be familiar with the research field already, which often makes it considerably easier to select a sample for the research. As insiders will normally appreciate many of the subtleties of the research field, they can often collect richer data than the external researcher. They may be aware of various elements of the research field, and hence will be able to take advantage of this knowledge in order to pursue the research aims. There are, however, disadvantages to being an insider researcher. Familiarity with the field means that it is sometimes easy to overlook aspects of the data which an outsider would have acknowledged. This very familiarity with the surroundings also tends to encourage researchers to take things for granted in terms of observation.

It is also worth noting that the two dimensions of outsider and insider research do not normally exist as mutually exclusive terms. Indeed the two categories do overlap a great deal. For example, any researcher who is operating within a research field for any length of time will inevitably develop an understanding of the research context similar to that of an 'insider'. Similarly, an insider researcher, no matter how familiar they are with the field, will remain something of an outsider, simply by virtue of collecting data about the other people present in that field.

These distinctions between insider and outsider research are brought into sharp focus in those situations where the research field is characterized by extreme social disadvantage and poverty. This was the case with Bahre (2007) and his research into community solidarity within South African

townships. This ethnographic research was conducted over a period of three years and the levels of violence operating in the township where he conducted the research clearly gave him cause for concern. He employed a South African research assistant who lived in the township, and for a period of two weeks lived in her home together with her husband and family. However, as a white person he was clearly an outsider in very many ways, and after this initial period he decided to live in his own home outside the township and to commute when the occasion was suitable. His research assistant had a mobile phone to contact him when it was judged safe to enter the township to conduct the ethnographic research.

In this context, the researcher was thus facing an enormous dilemma. The time which he had spent in the township, along with the interpretive help of his research assistant, enabled him to demonstrate some of the features of an insider researcher. However, the continual threat of violence, and his clear differentiation from the community under study, both culturally, racially, economically and in terms of education, created a definite sense of his being an outsider.

Many of the categories of research we have examined in this chapter will traditionally tend to use more qualitative than quantitative data, and it is perhaps true to say that there is a wider variety of terms associated with qualitative research. Often research which uses numerical data is simply described as quantitative research or perhaps statistical research. However there are different variants of quantitative research, sometimes distinguished from each other, because they employ different statistical techniques. One example is **correlational research**.

This type of research explores the relationship between different continuous numerical variables. For example, we might wish to examine a possible relationship between family income and the educational success of children measured by means of examination success rates at age sixteen. We may hypothesize, for example, that wealthier families are able in effect to purchase the kinds of opportunities for their children which will have a positive effect upon their educational performance. However, even if we found that there was a positive correlation between family income and educational performance, this would not prove that increased family income caused a better educational performance. In other words, a positive correlation does not demonstrate a causal connection, and it is very important to reflect this when writing about research findings.

It may be, for example, that parents who earn more will in general have higher levels of education themselves, and will in fact be able to provide more effective advice to their children on how to approach their education and school experience. There is a very wide range of possible explanations here,

and much more detailed research would have had to be undertaken to explore which was the most likely causal connection. It is therefore very important that when writing about research we do not exceed the boundaries of what we can reasonably claim from our findings.

## The sponsorship of research

Another practical variant of applied research is known as **evaluation research**. As its name implies this approach to research is very much functionally-oriented. The object of evaluation research will usually be a new organizational development or a social project. Those initiating the research will usually wish to have a balanced, objective, and systematic assessment of some aspect of the project. This could involve appraising the way in which it is operating and whether it seems to be successful in its fundamental aims, or it could involve, say, assessing the extent to which the staff teams are functioning as a cohesive whole. Evaluation research can either attempt to assess the on-going effectiveness of a project or assess the way it seems to be progressing, or alternatively, it can form a final assessment of the project once the objectives have been completed.

There is no specific methodology associated with evaluation research. The nature of the evaluation may sometimes require the collection of numerical data and the use of statistical analysis. This may be the case where the outcomes of a project are being compared with those of a different project. On the other hand, evaluation research will sometimes require the collection of detailed comments from participants and may also involve the use of interviews or focus groups. The latter was true of an evaluation study conducted by Fjellstrom (2008), in which those involved in a new undergraduate medical programme were interviewed. A variety of factors influenced the development of a new programme of medical training, and one of the purposes of the evaluation was to encourage a process of learning during the evaluation, rather than employing evaluation as a means of assessing the outcomes summatively.

A great deal of social research is **commissioned**; that is, an organization will identify a particular issue or problem which they would like investigating, and will ask a university, private research agency, or perhaps specialist industrial or commercial company, to carry out the research. There are many different arrangements which can be subsumed under the title of 'commissioned research'. The commissioning agency may not envisage paying for the research, but rather working collaboratively with someone on a project or problem. On the other hand, they may wish to support the research work financially, and hence to exercise **sponsorship** of the project. Where a potential

sponsor wishes to identify a suitable research agency, then they may open the project to **tender** and invite bids. A variety of factors might then determine the awarding of the project.

A related situation is where a research sponsor is seeking to have some research undertaken in order to inform a possible policy initiative. Such **policy-linked research** does however sometimes raise complex issues. It can happen that the general policy position of a potential research sponsor is a matter of public record and well-known. All the parties concerned will be well aware that certain research findings may be more in tune with the policy position of the sponsor than certain other findings. Although there may be no attempt whatsoever to influence the course of the research, or the interpretation of the findings, nevertheless the research and analysis will take place within an environment that reflects a certain viewpoint. Particularly where the sponsor may be paying for the research, this is not always an easy situation for those involved.
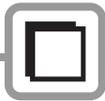
## Summary

This chapter has introduced the concept of research, and examined some of the ways in which we use the term. It has demonstrated some of the range of terms which are employed with different types of research. Finally, it has related research to some of the terms employed in the funding and sponsorship of research.

## Further reading

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