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THE GOOD RESEARCH GUIDE

for small-scale social research projects

SECOND EDITION

The Good Research Guide has been a best-selling introduction to the basics of social research since it was first published.

This new edition continues to offer the same clear guidance on how to conduct successful small-scale research projects and adds even more value by including new sections on internet research, phenomenology, grounded theory and image-based methods.

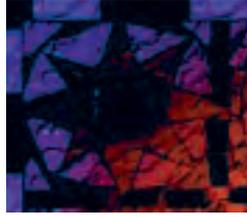
The book provides:

- A clear summary of the relevant strategies, methods and approaches to data analysis
- Jargon-free coverage of the key issues
- An attractive layout and user-friendly presentation
- Checklists to guide good practice

Practical and comprehensive, *The Good Research Guide* is an invaluable tool for students of education, health studies, business studies and other social sciences, who need to conduct small-scale research projects as part of undergraduate, postgraduate or professional studies.

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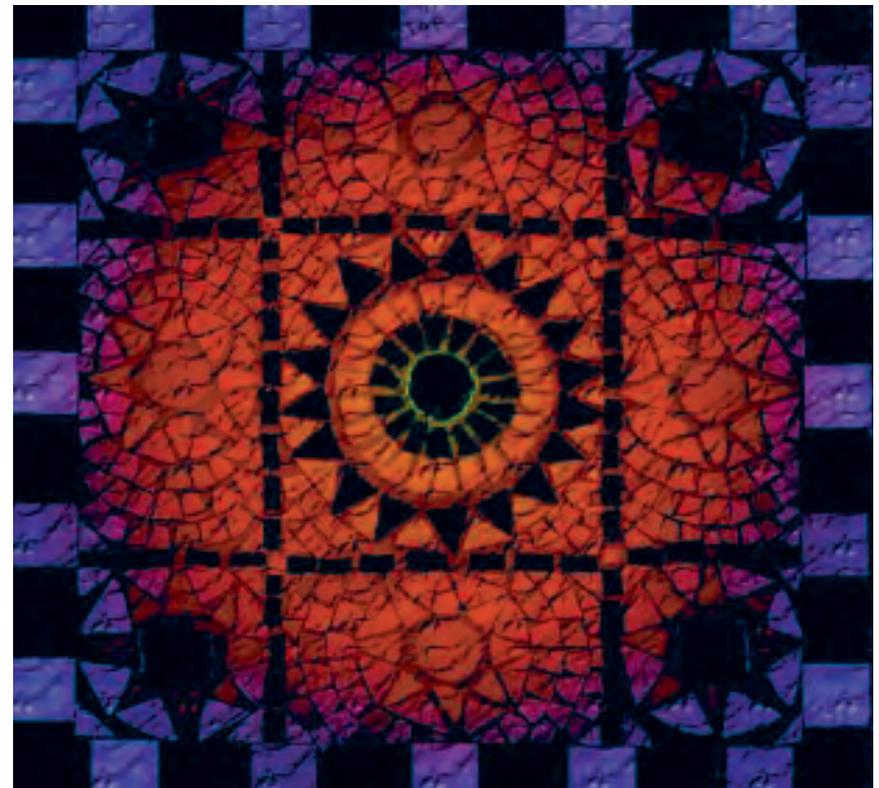
DENSCOMBE



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MARTYN DENSCOMBE

The Good Research Guide

Second edition

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Martyn Denscombe
Leicester



Introduction

A book for 'project researchers'

Social research is no longer the concern of the small elite of professionals and full-time researchers. It has become the concern of a far greater number of people who are faced with the prospect of undertaking small-scale research projects as part of an academic course or as part of their professional development. It is these people who provide the main audience for this book.

The aim of the book is to present these '*project researchers*' with practical guidance and a vision of the key issues involved in social research. It attempts to provide project researchers with vital information that is easily accessible and which gets to the heart of the matter quickly and concisely. In doing this, the book is based on three premises:

- 1 Most of what needs to be known and done in relation to the production of competent social research can be stated in *straightforward language*.
- 2 The foundations of good social research depend on paying attention to *certain elementary factors*. If such factors are ignored or overlooked, the research will be open to criticism and serious questions may be raised about the quality of the findings. Good research depends on addressing these key points. The answers may vary from topic to topic, researcher to researcher. There may be no one 'right' answer, but the biggest possible guarantee of poor research is to ignore the issues.
- 3 Project researchers can safeguard against making elementary errors in the design and execution of their research by using a *checklist approach*, in which they assure themselves that they have attended to the 'minimum' requirements and have not overlooked crucial factors associated with the production of good research.

Part I

Strategies for social research

The process of putting together a piece of good research is not something that can be done by slavishly following a set of edicts about what is right and wrong. In practice, the *social researcher is faced with a variety of options and alternatives and has to make strategic decisions about which to choose*. Each choice brings with it a set of assumptions about the social world it investigates. Each choice brings with it a set of advantages and disadvantages. Gains in one direction will bring with them losses in another, and the social researcher has to live with this.

There is no 'one right' direction to take. There are, though, some strategies which are better suited than others for tackling specific issues. In practice, good social research is a matter of 'horses for courses', where approaches are selected because they are *appropriate* for specific aspects of investigation and specific kinds of problems. They are chosen as 'fit for purpose'. *The crucial thing for good research is that the choices are reasonable and that they are made explicit as part of any research report.*

Key decisions about the strategy and methods to be used are usually taken before the research begins. When you have embarked on a particular approach

Horses for courses

- Approaches are selected because they are appropriate for specific aspects of investigation and specific kinds of problems.
- 'Strategic' decisions aim at putting the social researcher in the best possible position to gain the best outcome from the research.
- In good research the choices are (a) reasonable and (b) made explicit as part of any research report.

4 Strategies for social research

it is not easy to do a U-turn. Particularly for small-scale research, there tend to be tight constraints on time and money, which mean that the researcher does not have the luxury of thinking, 'Well, I'll try this approach and see how it goes and, if it doesn't work, I'll start again with a different approach . . . put Plan B into operation.' In the real world, research projects are normally one-off investigations where, if you do not get it right first time, the research fails.

To avoid starting on a path that ultimately gets nowhere there are some things which can be taken into consideration right at the outset as the researcher contemplates which approach to choose. In effect, the checklist on the following page can be used by the project researcher to gauge if what he or she has in mind is a 'starter' or a 'non-starter' as a proposition. If the researcher is able to score well in the sense of meeting the points in the checklist – not all, but a good majority – then he or she can feel fairly confident that the research is starting from a solid foundation and that it should not be necessary to back-track and start again once the project has got under way.

Key decisions about social research

When undertaking research you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:



Issue	Factors to be considered	
Relevance Does it really matter whether the research takes place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the research significant in relation to current issues in society?• Will the research build upon existing knowledge about the topic?• Are specific theories to be used, tested or developed?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Feasibility Can it be done?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there sufficient time for the design of the research, collection of data and analysis of results?• Will the resources be available to cover the costs of the research (e.g. travel, printing)?• Will it be possible and practical to gain access to necessary data (people, events, documents)?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Coverage Are the right things included?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will the questions cover the full range of issues?• Will an adequate number and suitable diversity of people, events etc. be included?• Will it be reasonable to make generalizations on the basis of the data collected?• Is it likely that there will be an adequate response rate?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Accuracy Will the research produce true and honest findings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will the data be precise and detailed?• Are respondents likely to give full and honest answers?• Will the investigation manage to focus on the most vital issues?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Objectivity What chance is there that the research will provide a fair and balanced picture?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can I avoid being biased because of my personal values, beliefs and background?• Will the research be approached with an open mind about what the findings might show?• Am I prepared to recognize the limitations of the research approach that is adopted?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Ethics What about the rights and feelings of those affected by the research?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can I avoid any deception or misrepresentation in my dealings with the research subjects?• Will the identities and the interests of those involved be protected?• Can I guarantee the confidentiality of the information given to me during the research?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>



Surveys

In one sense, the word ‘survey’ means ‘to view comprehensively and in detail’. In another sense it refers specifically to the act of ‘obtaining data for mapping’. These aspects of the definition of a survey, of course, derive from the classic versions of geographical surveys and ordnance surveys which map out the landscape or the built environment of roads and buildings. The principles, though, have been used to good effect on mapping out the social world as well as the physical world and, indeed, surveys have emerged in recent times as one of the most popular and commonplace approaches to social research. Such *social* surveys share with their physical counterparts some crucial characteristics.

- *Wide and inclusive coverage.* Implicit in the notion of ‘survey’ is the idea that the research should have a wide coverage – a breadth of view. A survey, in principle, should take a panoramic view and ‘take it all in’.
- *At a specific point in time.* The purpose of mapping surveys is generally to ‘bring things up to date’, and so it is with the notion of social surveys. Surveys usually relate to the present state of affairs and involve an attempt to provide a snapshot of how things are at the specific time at which the data are collected. Though there might be occasions when researchers will wish to do a retrospective study to show how things used to be, these remain more an exception than the rule.
- *Empirical research.* In the sense that ‘to survey’ carries with it the meaning ‘to look’, survey work inevitably brings with it the idea of empirical research. It involves the idea of getting out of the chair, going out of the office and purposefully seeking the necessary information ‘out there’. The researcher who adopts a survey approach tends to buy in to a tradition of research which emphasizes the quest for details of tangible things – things that can be measured and recorded.

The survey approach is a research strategy, not a research method. Many methods can be incorporated in the use of a social survey.

These three characteristics of the survey approach involve no mention of specific research methods. It is important to recognize this point. The survey approach is a research *strategy*, not a method. Researchers who adopt the strategy are able to use a whole range of methods within the strategy: questionnaires, interviews, documents and observation. What is distinctive about the survey approach is its combination of a commitment to a breadth of study, a focus on the snapshot at a given point in time and a dependence on empirical data. That is not to deny that there are certain methods which are popularly associated with the use of surveys, nor that there are certain methods which sit more comfortably with the use of the strategy than others. This is true for each of the main research strategies outlined in the book. However, in essence, surveys are about a particular approach – not the methods – an approach in which there is empirical research pertaining to a given point in time which aims to incorporate as wide and as inclusive data as possible.

1 Types of survey

Surveys come in a wide variety of forms, and are used by researchers who can have very different aims and discipline backgrounds. A brief listing can never include all the possibilities, but it can help to establish the most common types of survey and give some indication about their application.

Postal questionnaires

Probably the best known kind of survey is that which involves sending ‘self-completion’ questionnaires through the post. This generally involves a large-scale mailing covering a wide geographical area.

Postal questionnaires are usually, though not always, received ‘cold’ by the respondent. This means that there is not usually any personal contact between the researcher and the respondent, and the respondent receives no prior notification of the arrival of the questionnaire.



Link up with **Response rates**, p. 19

The proportion of people who respond as requested to such ‘cold’ postal questionnaires is quite low. The actual proportion will depend on the nature of

the topic(s) and the length of the questionnaire. As a rough guide, any social researcher will be lucky to get as many as 20 per cent of the questionnaires returned. As a result, this form of postal questionnaire tends to be used only with very large mailings, where a low response will still provide sufficient data for analysis. The small proportion that respond is unlikely to represent a true cross-section of those being surveyed in terms of age, sex, social class etc. Some types of people are more likely to fill in and return their questionnaires than others. However, the results can be 'weighted' according to what is already known about the composition of the people being surveyed (in terms of age, sex, social class etc.), so that the data which eventually get analysed are based on the actual proportions among those surveyed rather than the proportions that were returned to the researchers via the post.

Internet surveys operate on basically the same principle as the postal questionnaire. In the case of email, though, the mail-shot tends to be more random. It is more difficult to calculate who or how many will be contacted through the mail-shot. The potential advantage is that vast numbers can be contacted with practically no costs involved. Responding to the questionnaire can be made less onerous for the respondent, and returning the completed questionnaire can be done at a keystroke without the need for an envelope or stamp.



Link up with **Internet research, Chapter 3**

Face-to-face interviews

As the name suggests, the face-to-face survey involves direct contact between the researcher and the respondent. This contact can arise through approaches made by the researcher 'in the street'. The sight of the market researcher with her clipboard and smile is familiar in town centres. Or the contact can be made by calling at people's homes. Sometimes these will be 'on spec' to see if the householder is willing and able to spare the time to help with the research. On other occasions, contact will be made in advance by letter or phone.

The face-to-face interview is a more expensive way of conducting the survey than the use of the post or the use of telephones to collect information. Interviewer time and interviewer travel costs are considerable. Weighed against this, researchers might expect the data obtained to be more detailed and rich, and the face-to-face contact offers some immediate means of validating the data. The researcher can sense if she is being given false information in the face-to-face context in a way that is not possible with questionnaires and less feasible with telephone surveys.

The response rate will be better than with other survey approaches. Part of the researcher's skill is to engage the potential respondent and quickly manoeuvre the person to get his or her cooperation. An armlock is not called for here; something a little more subtle. The point is, though, that the face-to-face contact allows the researcher the opportunity to 'sell' the thing to the

potential respondent in a way that the use of questionnaires and telephones does not.

Face-to-face contact also allows researchers to select carefully their potential respondents so that they get responses from just those people needed to fill necessary quotas. A required number of males and females can be ensured. A suitable balance of age bands can be guaranteed. Appropriate numbers of ethnic groups and earnings categories can be incorporated with a minimum prospect of redundant material. There is an efficiency built into this form of data collection despite its expensive nature.



Link up with **Quota sampling**, p. 13

Telephone interviews

Telephone surveys used to be considered a rather suspect research method, principally because it was felt that contacting people by phone led to a biased sample. There was a strong probability that the kind of people who could be contacted by phone were not representative of the wider population. In the past they tended to be the financially better off. However, telephone surveys are now in widespread use in social research, and there are three main reasons for this.

- 1 *Telephone interviewing is cheaper and quicker than face-to-face interviewing.* Researchers do not have to travel to all parts of the country to conduct the interviews – they only have to pick up a phone. This has always been recognized as an advantage but, until recently, there have been doubts about the reliability of the data gathered by telephone. Social researchers have not been willing to sacrifice the quality of data for the economies that telephone interviewing can bring. However . . .
- 2 *Question marks are now being placed against the assumption that face-to-face interviews produce better, more accurate, data.* The emerging evidence suggests that people are as honest in telephone interviews as they are with face-to-face type interviews. ‘Initial doubts about the reliability of factual information obtained over the telephone and its comparability with information obtained face-to-face have largely been discounted . . . There is no general reason to think that the measures obtained by telephone are less valid (it has been claimed that in some situations they are more valid)’ (Thomas and Purdon 1995: 4).
- 3 *There is the prospect of contacting a representative sample when conducting surveys by phone.* It was estimated in the late 1990s that researchers were able to contact 91 per cent of people aged over 18 years directly by telephone. So doubts about the ability of telephone interviews to reach a sufficiently *representative sample* faded somewhat. Developments in technology have further boosted the attractiveness of telephone surveying because it has become easier to contact a truly *random sample* of the population using a

'random-digit dialling' technique. Researchers can select the area they wish to survey and identify the relevant dialling code for that area. They can then contact phone numbers at random within that area using random-digit dialling, where the final digits of the phone numbers are produced by computer technology which automatically generates numbers at random.



Caution

Cell phones pose something of a problem for telephone surveys. Increasingly, 'mobiles' are being used instead of – not just in addition to – conventional land-line phones and it is likely that, as things progress, more people will come to rely exclusively on their cell phone and cease to use a household land-line number. As a consequence, telephone surveys will face a new challenge in terms of reaching a representative sample of the population. Principally, this is because cell phone numbers are not allocated by geographical location. This means that the researcher can know very little about the likely social background of any cell phone user included in a survey.

Telephone contact brings with it some of the immediate one-to-one interaction associated with face-to-face interviews. Although it forfeits the visual contact of face-to-face interviewing, it retains the 'personal' element and the two-way interaction between the researcher and the respondent. It gives the researcher some brief opportunity to explain the purpose of the phone call and to cajole the respondent into providing the required information: 'Or perhaps I can call back at a later time if that is more convenient.' On the other hand, the telephone contact is more intrusive than the postal questionnaire, intruding on people's quality time at home in a way that a postal questionnaire does not. But, perhaps, more than this, it confronts the problem of having to contend with the 'double-glazing' sales pitch which comes over the phone in the guise of research. *The methods of genuine research can be used and abused to sell products rather than collect information.*

Documents

All too often in writing about social surveys, attention is focused solely on surveys of people. Yet, in practice, the strategy of the survey can be applied to documents as well as living people. The social researcher can undertake empirical research based on documents which incorporates as wide and as inclusive data as possible, and which aims to 'bring things up to date'. The *literature survey*, of course, is a prime example. It is the basis for good research and it involves the use of survey principles applied to documents on the topic of the research. The idea is to encompass as much as possible of the existing material – equivalent to getting the panoramic view of the landscape.



Link up with **Literature review**, p. 293

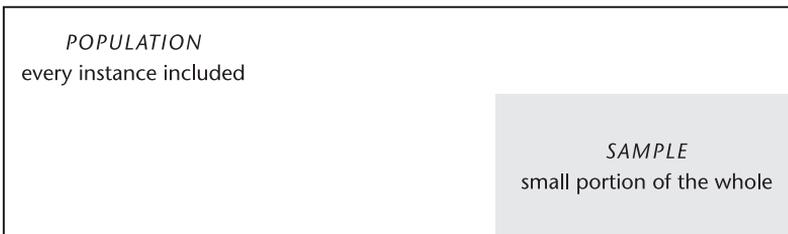
The literature review may be the kind of document survey with which most researchers are familiar. It is not, however, the only kind of document survey. Economists and business analysts rely heavily on surveys which use documents as their base data. They use records rather than people as their source of data. Company reports, financial records, employment statistics, records of imports and exports and the like provide the foundation for *business surveys and economic forecasts*, which are heavily used by governments and the world of commerce. And social policy developments would hardly be viable without the use of *demographic surveys* based on official statistics covering areas of residence, service provision, profile of the population etc.

Observations

Classic social surveys involved observations of things like poverty and living conditions. Such observation followed the tradition of geographical and ordnance surveys, with their emphasis on looking at the landscape. Although the practice of conducting a survey through observing events and conditions is less common as a feature of social research in the twenty-first century, it serves to remind us that the survey strategy can use a range of specific methods to collect data and that we should not get hung up on the idea of a social survey as meaning the same thing as a postal questionnaire survey. As well as asking people what they do and what they think, surveys can also *look* at what they actually do.

2 Surveys and sampling

Social researchers are frequently faced with the fact that they cannot collect data from everyone who is in the category being researched. As a result, they rely on getting evidence from a portion of the whole in the expectation and hope that what is found in that portion applies equally to the rest of the 'population'.



It is not good enough, though, to *assume* that findings for the sample will be replicated in the rest of the population. The sample in the first place needs to be carefully selected if there is to be any confidence that the findings from the