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## CHAPTER I

# Doing Social Science

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FIONA DEVINE AND SUE HEATH

## Introduction

This book introduces students to issues of method – not through an abstract ‘how to’ approach, but by focusing on specific examples of high quality empirical research which have been published since the year 2000. By so doing, we seek to highlight the excitement as well as the challenge of conducting real life research and to demonstrate how the choice and use of particular methods and techniques can critically shape the findings of social science research. Our book consists of a series of critical evaluations of recent research in core and new areas of social science – with themes as diverse as family change, online gaming and the Partition of India; international time-use, Brazilian soap operas and prison violence; and political interviews, goth subculture and attachment to place. We believe that the contributors to this book have identified studies which will provide a benchmark for high quality social science research in the years ahead. In addition to UK-based research, these studies include examples of research on other societies as well as comparative cross-national research. They also embrace a variety of social science disciplines, including sociology, cultural studies, media studies, criminology and social history.

These examples also reflect a number of important developments which have occurred in the world of social science methodology in recent years. In the UK context, there has been an explosion of interest in methodological concerns in social science research, alongside a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary research, which has led researchers from different disciplines, often with very different methodological traditions, to come together to tackle key social research questions. This has contributed more generally to the widespread adoption of mixed methods approaches to research. In addition, we

have seen the emergence of new methodological approaches, often linked to the possibilities afforded by technologies such as the internet and other communication technologies, and the development of, as well as enhanced access to, new sources of data, in many cases on an unprecedented scale. The first decade of the twenty-first century has also been marked by an unprecedented level of UK investment in the development of research methods, including the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s Research Methods Programme, the National Centre for Research Methods, the National Centre for e-Social Science, the Researcher Development Initiative, and the now biennial ESRC Research Methods Festival. All of these factors have led to a renewed interest in research methods as a field of study and have revitalized research in specific subfields. And all of these developments are reflected in the choice of studies included within this book. The methodological map of the UK is very different today than it was even ten years ago.

## The Choice of Studies

This book consists of nine separate case studies of exemplary social research representing a broad range of research topics. Each has been chosen by current or former colleagues from the Universities of Manchester and Southampton with interests in these research fields and who are therefore well-placed to develop a critique of their chosen studies from a position of expertise. Certain criteria have been adopted in determining which studies were chosen by our contributors. First, all of the studies have been published in book form since 2000, and should therefore be easily accessible. Second, the chosen studies cover a cross-section of some key areas of social science research: criminology, family life, work, leisure, subcultures, the media, gender divisions, social class, race and ethnicity, to name some of the dominant themes. Each of the studies that has been chosen also taps into an important aspect of people's everyday lives and sheds light on the operation of social divisions and other social processes within contemporary societies. Third, the studies which have been chosen cover a diverse range of research strategies (see Table 1.1). Fourth, they all include an explicit discussion of at least some aspects of their underpinning research design, hence making a detailed critique possible.

Each chapter starts with a short introduction to the chosen study and its broader context, followed by a discussion of where the study might be located in relation to other work and to broad theoretical and methodological traditions within that field of research. As will become clear, in some cases the studies follow very much in the footsteps of earlier research in their respective fields, whilst in other cases they mark a break with, or even a direct challenge to, what has gone before. The main findings of the research are then

**Table I.1 Research methods used in the nine case studies**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title of study</i>	<i>Methods</i>
T.L. Taylor	<i>Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture</i>	Online and offline participant observation; interviews
Kimmett Edgar, Ian O'Donnell and Carol Martin	<i>Prison Violence: The Dynamics of Conflict, Fear and Power</i>	Victimization surveys, interviews, documentary analysis
Jonathan Gershuny	<i>Changing Times: Work and Leisure in Postindustrial Society</i>	Time-use diaries
Mike Savage, Gaynor Bagnall and Brian Longhurst	<i>Globalization and Belonging</i>	In-depth interviews, local questionnaire survey
Paul Hodkinson	<i>Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture</i>	Participant observation, in-depth interviews, media analysis, questionnaire survey
Thomas Tufte	<i>Living with the Rubbish Queen: Telenovelas, Culture and Modernity in Brazil</i>	Interviews, participant observation, survey
Urvashi Butalia	<i>The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India</i>	Oral history interviews, documentary analysis (memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and letters), personal experience
Steven Clayman and John Heritage	<i>The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air</i>	Conversation analysis
Vern Bengtson, Timothy Biblarz and Robert Roberts	<i>How Families Still Matter</i>	Multicohort longitudinal survey design

summarized, before a discussion of two or three key methodological themes raised by the study in question. The link between research findings and research design is crucial, as the methods chosen by a research team can either create possibilities or place restrictions on the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn. Each chapter finishes with an overview of the methods and findings of the study, followed by some guidance on further reading in relation to both the substantive topic and the methods used.

Our contributors' choice of books has influenced the range and nature of issues of method that are addressed in this edited collection. Four issues emerged on numerous occasions across the chapters, although the following discussion highlights just one key issue in relation to each book under discussion. First, the relationship between theories and methods emerges in Wendy Bottero's discussion of *Globalization and Belonging* (2004) by Mike Savage and his colleagues, and in Paul Sweetman's consideration of Paul Hodkinson's

book, *Goth* (2002). Second, sampling techniques and measurement issues loom large in Vanessa May's evaluation of Vern Bengtson et al.'s *How Families Still Matter* (2002), in Dale Southerton's critique of Jonathan Gershuny's *Changing Times* (2000), and in Alice Mills's discussion of Kimmett Edgar et al.'s book, *Prison Violence* (2003). Third, research relationships in the field emerge in Graeme Kirkpatrick's consideration of T. L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006) and in Navtej Purewal's evaluation of Urvasi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (2000). Fourth, issues of interpretation are raised in Christian Greiffenhagen's discussion of Steven Clayman and John Heritage's *The News Interview* (2002) and in Helen Wood's consideration of Thomas Tufte's *Living with the Rubbish Queen* (2000). These four issues are now briefly introduced with reference to the case studies discussed in detail in each chapter.

## The Relationship between Theory and Method

A number of chapters in this book address the relationship between theories and methods in the social sciences. Recently, scholars have expressed their concern about the relationship between theoretical developments and the seemingly growing distance from empirical research on everyday life (Goldthorpe 2007a, 2007b; Savage and Burrows 2007; Smart 2007). On the one hand, theorists stand accused of engaging in grand speculative thinking and making predictions about epic social change uninformed by past empirical research. On the other hand, empirical researchers are criticized for dismissing theory as irrelevant to their needs and are then unable to draw wider conclusions from their work. Carol Smart (2007), for example, has recently described her unhappiness with theories of individualization – associated with Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). Such 'top-down' theories proffer clear and coherent explanations of social life whilst most peoples' everyday lives are messy and complex. The challenge is to develop more 'bottom-up' theories, which are informed by empirical research and capture the richness and complexity of everyday life without being confusing and incomprehensible.

Globalization, with its emphasis on the mobility of people, capital, objects and information, is an obvious example of a grand theory which makes big predictions about how the world is changing. In *Globalization and Belonging*, Savage et al. (2004) conducted large-scale qualitative research in four middle-class suburbs in Manchester to test the theory. They found that local identities are important, although they are not fixed and static. Their study is not without problems as Wendy Bottero astutely notes. The decision to concentrate on middle-class suburbs created limitations for the development of their own

theory of ‘elective belonging’. It is doubtful whether the same ideas about reflective choices apply to residents of working-class localities. Bottero also considers the limitations of qualitative interviews – which capture people’s micro experiences of a particular place – to say things about macrostructures and processes. Moreover, whether qualitative interviews are the best way to explore questions of embodiment, the tacit practices of the habitus and field relations – namely, to articulate aspects of life that are often left unarticulated – is also worthy of reflection.

The relationship between theory and method also looms large in Paul Sweetman’s consideration of Paul Hodkinson’s book, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* (2002). Critical of the work on youth culture and subcultures by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Hodkinson undertook a detailed study of goths by way of a multi-faceted ethnography involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, media analysis and a questionnaire. Goths form a distinctive subculture but its members are not especially subversive. Sweetman approves of Hodkinson’s detailed description of how goths live their everyday lives rather than simply conducting a textual or semiotic analysis of aspects of their style for its meaning and significance. He is not, however, entirely convinced by Hodkinson’s critique and refinement of the concept of subcultures. Is it still useful to retain a concept like subculture when most of its previous meaning has been stripped away? Are social scientists bound by past theory which, arguably, acts as a straightjacket that inhibits new ways of thinking about substantive topics like youth culture and subcultures?

## Sampling Techniques and Measurement Issues

Sampling techniques, namely ‘the selection of people, places or activities suitable for study’ (Lee 1993: 60), are without any doubt crucial issues in quantitative and qualitative research. Different sampling frames affect the representativeness of the sample (the degree to which the sample accurately reflects the characteristics of the broader sample) and the generalizability of the research findings (the degree to which one can say with confidence that the findings from one setting are likely to apply to similar settings). In longitudinal quantitative research, the big challenge is attrition when respondents do not want to be reinterviewed in subsequent waves of research. Non-response causes the sample to shrink and to become less representative of the population under investigation. The ability to generalize is compromised. Fortunately, these pressing methodological issues are themselves the subject of research so that attrition is better understood, avoided where possible, circumvented where not and the quality of data is improved (Plewis 2007; Vandecasteele

and Debels 2007). The chapters outlined next consider these issues and also wider concerns about the difficulties of measuring social phenomena like time pressures and prison violence.

Vanessa May considers representativeness and generalizability in her discussion of *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations* by Vern L. Bengtson, Timothy J. Biblarz and Robert E. L. Roberts (2002). The book is based on the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) which involved several generations of the same families in the research. Despite claims that families are less important than in the past, Bengtson and his colleagues found that family transmissions have not weakened over time and that contemporary young people are not fairing any worse than previous generations. May notes the limitations of the LSOG. The initial study was not a random probability study and was skewed towards white middle-class American respondents. The study also suffered from attrition problems over time as original sample members were not reinterviewed for various reasons. This is a real problem because any respondent who fails to take part in subsequent waves cannot be replaced and the sample size diminishes over time. Finally, longitudinal data cannot pinpoint *why* a particular change has taken place. The researcher has to provide a contextualized story for why change has occurred and what the contributing factors have been.

Dale Southerton picks up on measurement issues in his review of Jonathan Gershuny's book, *Changing Times: Work and Leisure in Postindustrial Society* (2000). Gershuny analysed 35 time-use studies (comprising a sample of 120,000 respondents filling in time diaries), conducted in 20 different countries between 1961 and the early 1990s. He found changes in the distribution of paid and unpaid work, in the domestic division of labour between men and women, and in the amount of leisure time enjoyed by different socio-economic groups. Southerton notes that measuring time-use is difficult. Coding is far from easy when diary entries are imprecise and the purpose of an activity is unclear. Such difficulties are compounded by comparative research where time intervals are measured differently. If time diary methodologies, like all survey data, provide only a partial account of everyday life, Southerton considers how it is possible to make the best use of available evidence, overcome shortcomings and remain aware of limitations. These are very important questions to ask if time-use diaries are to be better sources of data in the future and to help us understand social change.

Measurement issues also loom large in Alice Mills's discussion of *Prison Violence: The Dynamics of Conflict, Fear and Power* by Kimmitt Edgar, Ian O'Donnell and Carol Martin (2003). The book examines interpersonal violence between prisoners ranging from bullying to assault. It draws on two studies: a 'victimization study' funded by the Home Office and a 'conflicts study' funded by the ESRC as part of a Violence Research Programme.

Mills notes the difficulties of using a victimization survey to study prison violence. Edgar et al. issued an anonymous self-complete questionnaire which they distributed to prisoners while locked in their cells and collected them half an hour later. Given the high levels of overcrowding, Mills wonders how many of the prisoners were alone in their cells and therefore felt free to write about their experiences. She also considers whether prisoners, known to have low levels of literacy, would have been able to do such writing satisfactorily. Many prisoners would have needed help in this respect and, though finding themselves in the situation of having individuals to hand – prisoners or staff – who could assist, the very presence of these others might compromise their ability to write what they wanted. The problems of underreportage, in other words, are considered fully.

## Research Relationships in the Field

The nature of research relationships in the field is a key methodological issue. When are relationships too close that they lead to bias in the collection and interpretation of research material? Is it possible to eliminate bias in the name of objectivity or are we only able to discuss field relations in order to acknowledge their influence on how research gets done and substantive issues emerge? The latter approach, namely a commitment to a self-critical approach to social analysis – reflexivity – is now common in the social sciences (Heaphy 2007: 48; May 2003). Research relationships in the field are discussed by Sweetman with regard to Hodkinson's study of goth subculture noted above. More recently, critical reflection on the nature of field relations has raised discussion around ethical issues (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). How should we conduct ourselves with others in the field? Should we always seek informed consent from participants and how do we go about doing so? How much information should we provide on our research? Should vulnerable groups (where issues of power may arise) be treated differently (Heath et al. 2007; Wiles et al. 2006, 2007)?

These questions are extremely important at a time when social research embraces new areas of investigation. One such example is research on the internet, as discussed in Graeme Kirkpatrick's contribution to this volume. Kirkpatrick offers a critical appraisal of T. L. Taylor's book, *Play between Worlds* (2006), which is a qualitative ethnographic study of computer games. Taylor is especially interested in the social and cultural life to be found in this virtual world, including the friends and acquaintances that are developed and sustained. Kirkpatrick rightly notes that Taylor's book is a very exciting sociological exploration of the virtual world and there are new challenges for research ethics in online research. Social scientists are only just beginning to grapple with them.

For example, Kirkpatrick considers the ethics of ‘playing’ with disclosure and when researchers should reveal that they are conducting research to their unwitting participants (if at all). If researchers disclose their activities, can we tell if participants are then lost or if relationships change as a consequence? What are the implications for the research and research findings if these things happen?

Navtej Purewal explores issues of reflexivity in her discussion of Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (2000). The book focuses on the partition of India – into modern-day India and Pakistan – in 1947. It explores the human experience of these events – especially of women, children and the lower castes – and the pain and suffering they endured. Butalia’s book is an oral history of this period, based on intensive interviews and the reading of diaries, letters and memories over many years. Butalia critically reflects on her ‘use of self’, from how it motivated her to explore the hidden experiences of the partition to her way of writing the material for her book. The virtue of her approach is that she is explicit about her family experiences, though she is aware of its downsides too. The researcher has to be open to reinterpreting personal experiences, and this can be very uncomfortable. The temptation can be to shy away from such discomfort especially when the issues are close to heart. Reflexivity, therefore, is a considerable challenge for researchers.

## Questions of Interpretation

Questions of interpretation figure large in many of the studies included in this book, reflecting the continuing influence of methodological critiques arising out of the postmodern turn in the social sciences. Debates about the dual crises of representation and legitimation upon which these critiques are based (Devine and Heath 1999) often place a question mark over the validity of the interpretations which social scientists can offer when analysing data, and it is not unusual for researchers to emphasize the situated nature of their own interpretations, regardless of whether or not they would identify themselves as postmodernists. This section explores these issues in relation to Christian Greiffenhagen’s discussion of Steven Clayman and John Heritage’s *The News Interview* (2002) and Helen Wood’s consideration of Thomas Tufte’s *Living with the Rubbish Queen* (2000).

Clayman and Heritage’s book is concerned with the norms and conventions that govern the modern broadcast news interview. Based on conversation analysis (CA), the study focuses on the structural properties of radio news interviews with politicians in order to explore the ways in which the content of such interviews is directly achieved through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Greiffenhagen’s discussion of their work provides an overview of the practices and conventions that appear to govern the news

interview. He notes that conversation analysts consider the types of data which they analyse to be free from distortion, given that their data is not the product of an artificial encounter between a researcher and a research participant, but is instead a source of 'real world' data which can be readily shared with other researchers. Clayman and Heritage claim that this renders the process of interpretation more transparent, claiming further that 'within CA every effort is made to ground any analysis in the understandings and orientations of the participants themselves' (Clayman and Heritage 2002: 19). This position implies that participants' own understandings and orientations are largely self-evident. As Greiffenhagen points out, data do not speak for themselves in this way: the analytical challenge is how to decide between the different possible interpretations that can be placed upon an interaction.

A related set of issues arise in Helen Wood's discussion of Thomas Tufte's *Living with the Rubbish Queen* (2000), an ethnographic study of the impact of Brazilian telenovelas – serialized melodramas broadcast six days a week – on their largely female audiences in low-income urban areas of Brazil. His focus is firmly on how viewers interpret the meanings of these telenovelas and the ways in which they appropriate them as part of their lives, rather than on the interpretations that might have been intended by their producers. Wood quotes Geertz's (1973: 9) argument that 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to', yet she cautions against the assumption that 'anything goes' or that all interpretations meet on equal grounds. Her response is to take into account the extent to which the researcher's own positioning within his or her research might influence the validity of his or her interpretation(s), a consideration which would appear particularly relevant to a study by a middle-class, male, Danish researcher of the everyday lives of low-income Brazilian women. Tufte anticipates the criticism that his own authority to interpret these women's lives might be open to question by positioning himself as someone with a degree of 'insider' expertise; yet Wood is of the view that there is actually relatively little reflection on the impact of Tufte's own presence in the field – especially in relation to his gender – within the descriptions of his findings. She makes the case for the situated nature of any given interpretation, and acknowledges that not all accounts may be equally convincing once we know about a researcher's own positioning.

## **Some Observations about Our Methodological Coverage**

Inevitably, a book of this kind is not as comprehensive as a prescriptive methods text. We are aware of a number of omissions in our methodological coverage,

but we will highlight two in particular. First, often having neglected the visual senses in the past, scholars are increasingly aware of the ‘visual’ character of contemporary culture and how important ‘seeing’ is to ‘knowing’ about the world (Jenks 1995; Pink 2006; Prosser 1998). Social scientists are increasingly using visual material – photographs, film, art and other images – as data in empirical research. They are also using visual material as a methodological tool including, for example, as prompts for interviews and generating focus group discussions. Research participants are increasingly being asked to produce visual images as part of research projects too (Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pole 2004). These developments raise new methodological challenges. What kinds of questions can we ask of visual material? How do we go about sampling such material? How should visual data be analysed? Many of these questions have yet to be answered. There will be much ‘learning by doing’. These are exciting challenges for future generations of scholars and students. Second, there are important developments underway in longitudinal research in the UK. In the field of quantitative research, a new panel survey called Understanding Society has been launched, involving annual interviews with approximately 100,000 members of 40,000 households. The survey is the biggest of its kind in the world and will eventually also involve the collection of biometric data as well as some qualitative data. This new survey is being undertaken by the team previously responsible for the British Household Panel Survey, based in the ESRC’s United Kingdom Longitudinal Studies Centre at the University of Essex. In the field of qualitative research, the ESRC has recently launched the Timescapes Longitudinal Study, the first major qualitative longitudinal study to be funded in the UK. Timescapes currently consists of seven linked projects, all of which explore the ways in which personal and family relationships change over time. All use a combination of different qualitative approaches to data generation, including interviews, narratives, photographs and other visual documents. Timescapes has a strong methodological strand running through all of the projects, which is concerned with developing new approaches to the use, reuse and sharing of longitudinal qualitative data and the ways in which different studies might be combined for purposes of exploring social change. Both Timescapes and Understanding Society are exciting methodological developments which will facilitate a better understanding of personal, social and historical change.

The ways in which we collect evidence and the methods by which we do so are, then, dynamic issues in the social sciences. Research is an ongoing creative process (Pole and Lampard 2001). New types of evidence and new forms of method pose exciting challenges for current and future generations of both scholars and students. It is our intention that the discussion of the topics in this book will stimulate students to think more explicitly about evidence and methods, and to evaluate critically both how research is done and the

substantive findings that are drawn from such research. By avoiding an abstract and dry discussion we have sought to consider methods in a fresh and invigorating way. The welcome consequence of such an endeavour has been to draw on published work which is testimony to the continued strength of theoretically informed empirical research in the social sciences.

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