TRAINING MATERIALS

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Training Guide: Introduction to Social Research

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and Inclusive Societies

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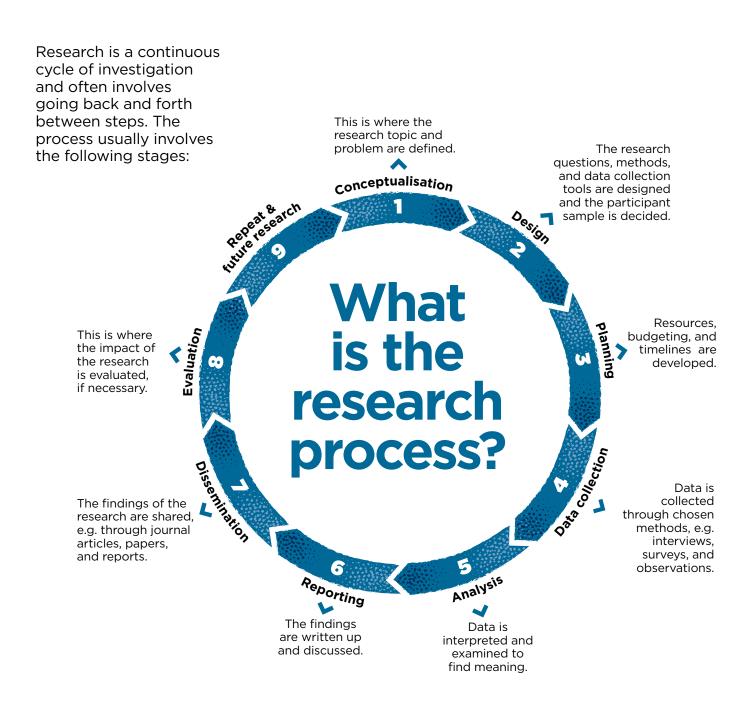UNIVERSITY

What is Social Research?

This guide provides an introduction to social research and defines key terms. It provides an overview of the research process, different types of social research, and the benefits and risks associated with research.

What is research?

Research is a careful and detailed study of a specific problem or issue. To begin researching, we often start with turning a problem or issue into a question, with the aim of conducting research to answer that question.

This can be done by conducting new research or analysing and synthesising previous research findings (e.g. through systematic reviews). Research can be defined as

" the creation of new knowledge and/or using existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings."

(**Australian Research Council, 2015:3**).

Research is a continuous cycle of investigation and often involves going back and forth between steps. The process usually involves the following stages:

This is where the research topic and problem are defined.

Conceptualisation
1

Design
2
The research questions, methods, and data collection tools are designed and the participant sample is decided.

Repeat & future research
9

Evaluation
8
This is where the impact of the research is evaluated, if necessary.

What is the research process?

Planning
3
Resources, budgeting, and timelines are developed.

Data collection
4
Data is collected through chosen methods, e.g. interviews, surveys, and observations.

Dissemination
7
The findings of the research are shared, e.g. through journal articles, papers, and reports.

Reporting
6
The findings are written up and discussed.

Analysis
5
Data is interpreted and examined to find meaning.

What types of research are there?

Research is very broad and there are many different types of research that use different methods to answer the research questions.

Research can be about anything, from finding effective treatments for cancer, to exploring the impact of the pandemic on education and employment for young people. There are many different approaches to research, from observing events taking place, to manipulating specific variables and measuring their impact. When different services, policies or programs are introduced in practice, research may be used to understand what difference they have made to the community or issues being addressed.

The type of data collected can be qualitative (e.g. data from focus groups and interviews, and also drawings and photos) and quantitative (e.g. responses to questions in a survey, that can be analysed numerically).

Social research aims to learn more about people and societies by studying social trends, dynamics, the behaviours and practices of people and how meaning is created in individuals, groups and societies. It is a broad category that can include many fields such as psychology, sociology, human geography, and anthropology. Social research can be quantitative, qualitative and use participatory and digital methods.

Quantitative

Numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics

Digital

Research using digital technology such as computers, smartphones apps, digital platforms such as social media and software

Qualitative

Scientific method of inquiry and observation

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

An approach to research in communities that emphasises participation and action. It seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and following reflection

Research Methods

There are many traditional - and innovative - methods that can be used to uncover insights to address social research questions. Many of these methods can harness digital technology to collect data.

→ **Surveys:** Surveys involve asking the same questions to a large number of participants to produce numerical data and qualitative data from open-ended responses. Surveys can be used to validate insights from focus groups or interviews, or as a starting point to then deep-dive into key themes through qualitative methods.

→ **Ethnography:** This involves detailed observation of people in their natural environments, with the idea that we can better understand people when we can observe what they do.

→ **Focus groups:** A research technique used to collect data through group interaction. The group typically comprises of a small number of people who discuss a given topic.

→ **Interviews:** An in-depth, discovery-orientated method to obtain detailed information about a topic from a partici-pant. The interviewer will aim to explore the respondent's point of view, experiences, feelings and perspectives.

→ **Participatory or co-design workshops:** Researchers guide a group of participants through a design process and leverage their expertise on a topic. Workshops use creative, participatory activi-ties, such as mind-mapping and journey mapping, to explore experiences and discover opportunities.

> Check out more about participatory design methods in **this guide** by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre. See more creative methods by MakeTools, **here.**

→ **Living Labs:** Workshops with groups of participants simulate a real-life activity that brings together different groups of people to explore a problem and its possible solutions. See more about this method in use at the **Young and Resilient Research Centre here.**

→ **Arts-based research:** Participants may be asked to represent their ideas and insights through creative expression, e.g., painting, photography, creative writing, and drawing.

→ **Online research forums or communities:** A group of participants contribute their ideas and responses to questions via an online forum which spans over a set period of time. Participants can respond to each other and build upon responses.

→ **Diary studies:** Participants individually respond to a series of questions each day over a set period of time. This method provides insights into an individual's everyday life, behaviours, thoughts, feelings and routine.

> **TRAINING ACTIVITIES:**
>
> Use **these Quizlet flash-cards** to explore different social research methods and case studies of these methods in action.
>
> Download **this Miro board** for interactive worksheets exploring research methods.

Why is research important?

Research helps us to better understand the world around us. Without research, we would be forced to solely rely on intuition, other people's authority, and some luck. Below are just a few of the reasons that highlight the importance of research.

→ **Research helps us to solve important problems.**
The goal of research is to broaden our understanding. Research allows us to collect information and knowledge efficiently and logically, including expanding on any prior knowledge we have. This means we are better equipped to understand problems and create logical and innovative solutions.

→ **Research provides us with the latest information.**
Research allows us to seek out the most up-to-date facts. There is always new knowledge and discoveries to be made to improve the current way we do things. Staying updated keeps us from falling behind and providing inaccurate or incomplete information that can lead to poor decision making. Research creates new opportunities for learning and progress.

→ **Research gives us the evidence to advocate for social change.**
People are more likely to take us seriously when they can tell we are well informed. Conducting research provides a solid foundation on which we can build ideas and opinions. It allows us to more confidently build the evidence-base to enhance our understanding and therefore, advocate effectively for social change.

→ **Research allows us to share valuable information with each other.**
Research can be used to help raise awareness of important issues, such as climate change. Without hard facts, it can be very difficult to prove that climate change is getting worse. However, people need to have access to information and evidence, especially on issues that affect them. Plus, research can involve going beyond abstracted data to sharing real-life stories and our experiences with one another.

What are the risks of research?

Although research has many important benefits, there are some risks that we need to be aware of when conducting research.

→ **Research can reproduce privilege.**
The pathway to becoming a researcher often means going to university and is therefore dominated by privileged groups who can afford to spend many years in higher education. This formal pathway to becoming a researcher often excludes those who have not gained higher tertiary education. This has a domino effect on the research that is conducted, potentially skewing research topics to investigate issues that affect more privileged communities.

→ **Research with marginalised groups is often under-resourced**.
As funding is a scarce resource, research around issues affecting marginalised groups is often under-resourced. This means that some issues may remain underrepresented and the research that is undertaken is often low in quality due to time and money constraints.

→ **Research may be inaccessible or not adopted in practice.**
Reports that are overly technical, lengthy and use complex, academic language may make the findings inaccessible for many audiences, no matter how important they might be. This may result in research evidence and recommendations sitting on a shelf, rather than contributing to the evidence-base and influencing change.

→ **Industry sponsors can influence the research findings**.
Over the last two decades, industry funding for research has increased while government and non-for-profit funding has decreased. This can mean that industry sponsors may influence the research agenda, design, and conduct of research, as well as partial publication of research, where only the findings favourable to the funders are published.

→ **Misrepresentation of findings.**
Traditional media (e.g. news stations) and non-traditional media platforms (e.g. social media) have become important and rapid sources of information. However, the way research is interpreted and shared can have unintended negative consequences. For example, media reporting can misrepresent research findings by either inaccurately over-emphasising or over-simplifying conclusions for the general public. This is commonly seen in "click-bait" headlines. For example, the **Huffington Post** incorrectly equated the health benefits of red wine to an hour at the gym.