COLIN ROBSON
KIERAN McCARTAN

REAL WORLD RESEARCH

Fourth Edition

REAL WORLD RESEARCH

"Robson and McCartan continue to highlight in a coherent manner the complexity and importance of social research. This is much more than a key textbook on research design and process. This is also a book on tactics and strategy that will increase both undergraduate and postgraduate understandings of real world research."

Richard Race,
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"This has to be the most comprehensive book about doing applied social research on the market. Written in an accessible style, it is an important resource for new researchers, practitioners and old hands alike. It is full of practice examples and is a real 'how to do it' guide. This edition updates an already well-read best seller. The range of resources and tools presented is quite frankly, breath-taking."

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"This book is the best general resource that I know of for those wanting to conduct research in the 'real world'. The writing is clear and accessible, the coverage is remarkable for its comprehensiveness, and the focus is admirably practical."

Professor Joseph Maxwell,
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"This is a really useful book for anyone interested in conducting research that matters—that is, applied research, or as the authors here term it 'real world research'. This is a comprehensive text which manages to cover a broad range of research methods (how to do things), whilst also including all those other 'need to know' items, such as ethics and how to report findings to a variety of audiences. An excellent book, I can highly recommend it."

Dr Belinda Winder,
Reader in Forensic Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, UK

"*Real World Research* is an invaluable resource for academics wishing to engage in a rigorous manner with the world outside the University. For my own students of interdisciplinary design, this new edition will continue to provide a constant and essential reference guide, as well as a lucid introduction to the broader issues surrounding the creation of new technologies for human benefit."

Alan Blackwell,
Professor of Interdisciplinary Design, University of Cambridge, UK

"This pragmatic guide to learning, thinking about, actually doing, and using research works well for many audiences. The writing is lively and stimulating, the multi-disciplinary content is well assembled, and together they nurture creativity in decision-making and judgement in the face of complexity. It is what it says it is".

Professor Jim McCambridge,
University of York, UK

"The 4th edition of *Real World Research* continues to enhance this comprehensive companion book. In the new edition Robson effectively starts to identify and define the unicorns of successful research. Complementing the full articulation of research *methods* and *process* in earlier editions, this edition offers insights to *facilitate* the research process; capturing tangible examples of the invisible ways to support and achieve programmes of research alongside the documented methods of research."

Rowena Hill,
Division of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University, UK

REAL WORLD RESEARCH

A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings

Fourth Edition

Colin Robson & Kieran McCartan

WILEY

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Dedicated by Colin Robson to Mark and Catherine
Dedicated by Kieran McCartan to Sue and Isaac

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PREFACE

The central purpose of this book has remained essentially unchanged over the four editions: to give advice and support to those wishing to carry out a 'real world' research project. That is, one seeking answers to problems faced in areas such as healthcare, education, business and management and other people-related fields, rather than being concerned primarily with advancing an academic discipline. The focus is mainly on projects for which social research methods can be used. However, a change in this edition is the greater attention given to 'desk-based' projects based solely on existing research, which are common in some fields of research. This is partly because the real world, in the shape of the various agencies willing to provide funding for research, increasingly calls for this type of research – not least because it is quicker and cheaper than empirical projects collecting new data. It also recognizes that, in some disciplines and fields of study, the norm for students has always been for students to do desk-based research. And that, in others, students are now restricted to it for a variety of reasons, including financial ones when resources are limited, and ethical concerns where safeguarding those taking part in research and the students themselves is important.

As well as taking note of the real world for students, the book seeks to address the needs of researchers, both new and established. Their real world is ever more challenging. Pressures on those in universities intensify when their ability to obtain funding for research and complete projects with measurable impact is crucial not only for their personal careers but also for the future of their department, even for the institution itself.

Other changes in the context of carrying out research projects, highlighted in the third edition, are still with us. They include:

- an increased emphasis on ethical considerations when carrying out research involving people – and the need to come to terms with ethical committees;
- the mighty bandwagon of evidence-based everything; and
- the all-pervading Internet – particularly the rise of social media.

We try to provide an even-handed approach; recognizing their existence and importance, while pointing out problems that they pose.

The addition of a second author, discussions with colleagues and students directly involved with carrying out this kind of research, and feedback from users (and non-users) of earlier editions have all helped to provide an agenda for changes and development in this new edition. It has also proved very instructive to review the citations to 'Real World Research' in journal articles, these and other publications. Using the invaluable Google Scholar (see p. 53) in September 2014, citations of the third edition since 2013 covered work in 23 countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Egypt, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States) and 14 fields of research (Business and Management, Computer Science, Criminology, Development Studies, Economics, Education, Engineering, Environmental Studies, Film Studies, Geography, Health, Psychology, Social Work, and Sociology.

This exercise, together with a search for other recently published real world-type articles, provided insights into the 'real world' of published journal articles which has informed the approach in this edition.

Another reality check has come from findings about how social researchers actually go about their research as distinct from how research methods texts say they should (e.g. Bryman, 2006b). This has reinforced the perception that jobbing researchers often seem to get on quite adequately without worrying about philosophical matters such as epistemology and ontology. We have tried to restrict such matters to a 'need to know' footing. On that basis, we continue to try to persuade readers of the value of a realist approach to applied social research. Further recent developments have gone a long way to rectifying the lack of material which shows the practical implications of going realist, and providing examples of doing this.

An increased interest in social research methods, and their teaching, in UK universities continues, fostered by the ESRC's (Economic and Social Research Council) highly successful 'Research Methods Initiative'. The various workshops, reviews and briefing papers produced under the aegis of the initiative, and their highlighting of methodological challenges for the 21st century, are invaluable, as will be seen in numerous references in the text.

This mention of a UK initiative is a prompt to make it clear that, while we are UK based and no doubt to some extent UK biased in the selection of materials, a conscious effort has been made to cast the net widely in both journal and text references. There appears to be a degree of unhelpful chauvinism in research methods texts (shown in extreme form in some from the US!). Appreciating the different approaches and traditions in other countries provides yet another example of the value of the anthropologists' advice to 'spend some time in the neighbouring village'.

The 'fixed design' and 'flexible design' distinction introduced in earlier editions is retained in preference to the more commonly used 'quantitative design' and 'qualitative design'. Also, the term 'multi-strategy designs' is preferred to the widely used one of 'mixed-methods designs'. There are good arguments for these deviations from accepted usages, which are presented in the text.

The references have been updated where appropriate. Several 'golden oldies' have been retained if older material makes a point better than more recent efforts. The text is heavily referenced so that readers can follow up topics and issues that interest them, or look likely to be relevant to their research efforts.

The preface to the previous edition of this text ended with the following credo:

> *I hold two diametrically opposed views about many aspects of life. On the one hand, I consider doing research, including real world research, as pretty straightforward and simple. Approached with integrity, and some forethought, anyone should be able to carry out a worthwhile project. On the other hand, it is enticingly complex, to the extent that some very bright people, who have devoted their working lives to the task, continue to dispute how it should be done. The book seeks to reflect both these views. I have tried to signpost a way through the minefield so that someone with little background feels empowered to produce a competent piece of work relevant to a problem or issue of concern.*
>
> *I have also attempted to give an indication of what Baranov (2004, p. 8) refers to as the 'issues and debates below the surface of social research methods', and sufficient leads for the interested reader to follow these up (with some discussions of interesting but more peripheral matters placed on the website). As may be evident there are aspects of current practices and conventions in social*

research which I view as misguided, including the heavy reliance on significance testing in statistical analysis, and I have tried to give a voice to dissidents who articulate such discontents.

I remain convinced of the centrality of research questions to the process of carrying out real world research. Working out a good set of related research questions helps to get your ideas sorted out. Working out how you get answers to these questions shapes the design of the research. The answers are the key part of your findings.

As you will have noted, this text is now under joint ownership. I am very pleased that Kieran has agreed to share the task of keeping *Real World Research* up to date. And also that he is very much in tune with the approach taken in the book (having used it himself throughout his academic life, from BSc to PhD to academic researcher, and as a course text with his students for several years) – including this credo.

WAYS OF USING THE BOOK

Recommendations

- If you are following a course of some kind, then the needs and structure of the course will shape your use. It is likely that the course will be to prepare you to carry out your own project. To get a full appreciation of the range of issues involved it is best to start at the beginning of the book and work through to the end. Our own preference is to go through initially at some speed so that your momentum keeps you going through any bits that you don't take in fully. From this you get a feeling for the general lie of the land, and can then return at more leisure to sections which are important for your needs or which you found difficult.
- If you want to use the book to help carry out a research project – either by yourself, possibly for a research degree, or as part of a group – you have two main choices. Do the same as is suggested above and effectively use the book as a self-study course guide – then home into the bits you need.
- Alternatively, you could jump straight in and use it more as a 'how to' cookbook. (It is difficult to understand the denigration of 'methods' cookbooks by some commentators. Obviously some are mere recipe books but others are much more.) To do this, use the shaded pages which are intended to provide an overview of the main stages of the research process and appear at intervals throughout the book. They can be picked out from the Contents list where their headings are shaded in the same way as those in the text.
- If you are using this book as a course tutor or to help others to carry out research projects, you are likely to be familiar with much of the material in the text and a quick glance should locate aspects to recommend to your students. Some of the material differs from the traditional, however (particularly in the first two parts), and you are recommended to review these sections to key you in to the line taken.

Associated website

The website associated with the book (www.wiley.com/college/robson) has several different types of material which support and complement the text. These include:

- illustrative examples of recent journal and other articles in a range of different disciplines or areas of study for a wide range of topics;
- additional discussion on methodological and other topics which some readers may wish to explore; and
- annotated lists of further reading for each chapter.

A set of PowerPoint slides keyed into the different sections and chapters of the book, which may be useful for teaching purposes, is provided in a separate Instructors' website (www.wiley.com/college/robson). The material in the website will be updated on a regular basis.

Links to some of the many websites covering issues relevant to carrying out a real world research project are given in the text itself.

The Internet provides such amazingly extensive and valuable resources for anyone carrying out research that we would urge any intending real world researcher to make serious efforts to gain proficiency in harvesting these resources. And to be able to discriminate between the dross and the good stuff. See Chapter 3, p. 54.

Disclaimers

- *No single text could hope to cover all you need to carry out a worthwhile research project – particularly one relevant to practical real world issues.* This text is wide-ranging and tries to give the reader a feeling for the issues involved in designing, carrying out, analysing and reporting on different kinds of study so that you appreciate some of the many possibilities open to you. The intention has been to try to provide a clear overall structure, while seeking to address some of the complexities and controversies in current social research. We are interested in innovative approaches and feature several which we consider worth consideration. Each chapter has annotated suggestions for further reading in the website. This is particularly important in the case of specific methods and techniques of investigation and analysis, where it is highly likely you will have to go beyond what is provided here.
- *All the reading in the world won't make you into a skilled researcher.* There is the danger of the centipede problem (it never moved again after trying to work out which leg it moved first) and much to be said for jumping in, carrying out a project or two and developing skills through experience – using this text as a reference along the way. This is, in fact, an important feature of flexible design research; it is flexible in the sense that the design evolves as a result of your data-gathering experiences. Fixed designs (such as experiments and surveys) do call for considerable pre-planning before the main data collection, but you can, and should, gain experience through pilot work.

The use of language

- In order to avoid both the suggestion that all real world researchers and others involved are males (or females) and the clumsy 'she/he', the plural 'they' is used whenever feasible. If the singular is difficult to avoid, we use 'she' and 'he' in a fairly random sequence.
- The preferred term to refer to people who agree to be involved in social research is 'participants'. Other terms are used in some situations.

The main steps when carrying out a project

As a first step you are strongly recommended to:

- start your project journal.

To complete a project you need to:

- decide on a focus for the project;
- develop a set of research questions;
- choose a research design;
- select the method(s);
- arrange practicalities for data collection;
- collect data;
- prepare the data for analysis;
- analyse and interpret the data; and
- report and disseminate your findings.

Note: To carry out a purely desk-based study, your data are the reports of previous research and hence you need not worry about many of the data collection issues. See Chapter 5.

PART I

Setting the scene

Before leaping into a project, you need to have an idea about what you are letting yourself in for. Real world research, as discussed and explained at the beginning of Chapter 1, is often an 'away fixture' taking place on someone else's territory. As Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002) put it: 'In such settings as schools, businesses, clinics, hospitals, welfare agencies, and homes, researchers have far from perfect control, are typically guests and not royalty, have to negotiate and not command, and often must compromise rather than get everything they would like' (p. xix). False moves can inoculate a firm, school or wherever against future involvements, not only with you, but with other potential researchers – and, possibly, against the whole idea of systematic enquiry as an approach to dealing with problems or understanding situations. Practitioners, such as nurses, teachers or social workers, when getting involved with research, commonly wish to research some aspect of the situation in which they work or are already involved in some way. Here you will have to live with any mess you make.

This is not to argue for things being cut and dried before starting. Any proposals you make for carrying out a project will benefit from discussing your ideas with others including 'stakeholders' – i.e. those likely to have an interest in the research either because it might involve them in some additional efforts or trouble, or who might be affected by the findings. Indeed there is much to be said in favour of collaborative ventures, where the 'client' and/or others involved have a substantial say in the enterprise.

Keeping your own project journal

It is good practice to keep a full and complete record of all the various activities with which you are involved in connection with the project. Some people limit this to the stages when they are collecting data. It is certainly invaluable then as it helps to keep in one place details of appointments and meetings, what data were actually collected, where, when, etc. However, there is much to be said for starting the journal on day one of planning the project. It can take a variety of formats but an obvious one is a large-size diary with at least a

page for each day (they come very cheaply from about March each year!). Keeping it on your computer is attractive, providing you have good computer housekeeping habits.

The kinds of things which might be entered include:

- Notes of things you have read; references (get into good habits of taking full references – see Chapter 3, p. 52 – the effort now will save you pain later when you are trying to chase up missing references). You may find that you get an idea about A when working on B – if you don't make a note, it may get lost.
- Any thoughts relevant to the project, particularly when you decide to modify earlier intentions; reminders to yourself of things to be done; people to be chased up, etc.
- Appointments made, and kept, together with an aide-mémoire of where you have put anything arising from the meeting (one strategy is to include everything here in the diary).
- Taking stock of where you are in relation to each phase of the project; short interim reports of progress, problems and worries; suggestions for what might be done.

Knight (2002, p. 2) also recommends including reflections on how you, as researcher, are influencing the research findings and on the significance of that influence. Also warnings of things to avoid, such as helping out or giving advice when you are supposed to be simply observing.

The journal can be very valuable when you get to the stage of putting together the findings of the research and writing any reports. In particular, with some styles of research where it is expected that you produce an *audit trail* (a full record of your activities while carrying out the research) or a reflexive journal (an account reflecting on the process of the research), the research journal is indispensable.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This chapter:

- explains what is meant by focusing on the real world;
- argues that design matters;
- stresses that much real world research is concerned with evaluating something, and that there is often a concern for action or change;
- reveals the authors' assumptions about what you are looking for in using this book;
- attempts to give something of the flavour of real world research; and
- concludes by arguing for knowing something about methodology (the fundamental principles on which the methods of social research are based) as well as the practicalities of doing a project.

What is real world research?

Real world research, as the term is used in this book, refers to *applied research* projects which are typically small in scale and modest in scope. Real world research looks to examine personal experience, social life and social systems, as well as related policies and initiatives. It endeavours to understand the lived-in reality of people in society and its consequences. A substantial amount of *research* of this type is carried out in universities or research institutes by both staff and students, particularly in applied fields such as business and management, criminology, education, and health-related areas such as nursing, social policy, social work and socio-legal studies. There is also applied work in academic social science disciplines including psychology and sociology. It also commonly takes place in local government, businesses, NGOs (non-government organizations) and community organizations, where it is carried out by professionals and practitioners, including practitioner-researchers.

This means that real world research can shape the world as well as explain to us why the world is in the shape that it is. Its focus is different from much *academic research* where the main

concern is with developing and extending an academic discipline. The topics selected are those of current interest to social scientists in universities and other advanced institutions. Research of this type is of high prestige in those circles. Real world research is a mixed bag, with the common theme that the main interest lies elsewhere. This doesn't mean that there is a strict dichotomy between academic research and applied research with real world concerns. As Alan Baddeley puts it in a paper on applying cognitive psychology '. . . the combination of practical satisfaction and theoretical make the attempt to combine basic and applied research very rewarding' (Baddeley, 2013, p. 443). Not that this is easy though. Chelimsky (2013) is concerned that in the field of evaluation there is much current practice where *theory* is largely ignored, while theoretical writing fails to understand the problems of practitioners in the real world.

Much real world research focuses on problems and issues of direct relevance to people's lives, to help find ways of dealing with the problems or of better understanding the issues. There is no lack of such problems. A fairly random selection highlighted at the time of writing includes crime, austerity and social change, climate change, education, terrorism, gambling, anti-social behaviour, obesity and diet, child care and abuse, and provision for old age, amongst a host of other concerns. The faith is that research, in the sense of principled, careful and systematic enquiry, is one of the best tools available to address these issues.

This book focuses on problems and issues which have a 'people' dimension and relevant *research methods* and approaches. The focus is not overly restrictive as all the problems and issues listed above impinge on humans in some way. Many problems, particularly large-scale, global ones such as climate and environmental change, call for expertise in a range of *natural sciences* and technologies, but the effects on, and of, the way that people behave are an important part, both of the problems and of their solution. Hence, the book, and the examples used within it, is multi-disciplinary.

As indicated above, the main focus in *Real World Research* is on relatively small-scale research carried out by individuals or small teams. Again, this is not a major restriction as much real world research concerns problems and issues which are practical, local and grounded in a specific context, and where the need is for answers within a short time-scale. And even global problems have local implications so that sensible projects can be carried out with limited resources. For example, Serrao-Neumann, Di Giulio, Ferreira and Choy (2013) were involved with local-scale projects undertaken in urbanized coastal areas in Brazil and Australia, focusing on improving the dialogue between researchers and decision-makers to improve climate-change adaptation. This research provided suggestions for dealing with the issue studied and made recommendations for change.

In carrying out this type of research, a strong dose of humility is needed. It takes place in highly complex and often volatile situations where conclusions are necessarily tentative. These situations are almost inevitably political (with both a small and a large 'p') and there can be many reasons why even eminently sensible proposals arising from the research do not come to pass. For example, educational researchers have faced sustained criticism in the United Kingdom from politicians and others to the extent that the president of the British Educational Research Association claimed that because of a range of perceived shortcomings, 'educational research might not be missed (even gladly dismissed) by some practitioners and policy makers' (Mortimore, 2000), although he goes on to assert that, 'the work is essential if independent questioning and impartial evaluations of policy and practice are to take place' (p. 5).

The real world notion carries the suggestion of breaking out from the ivory tower and trying to deal with problems affecting people's lives directly. It can also be viewed as moving from the

research laboratory into places such as schools, hospitals, businesses, shopping malls, street corners or any other setting where people work, play or go about their lives. There is ample evidence that findings from *laboratory research* are not necessarily replicated in other settings. Levitt and List (2006) discuss differences in the *data* from laboratory experiments and data generated in natural settings, pointing out that each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and a combination of the two is likely to provide deeper insights than either in isolation. It is similarly dangerous to generalize from studies with university student participants to other groups. Mintz, Redd and Vedlitz (2006) conducted an *experiment* with a group of military officers and replicated it with a group of students at a public university in the United States. In a scenario dealing with a decision problem in the area of counter-terrorism, the two groups gave widely differing results. However, while most real world research takes place in the 'field' (as non-laboratory settings are often referred to by social scientists) and with non-student groups, some researchers with a real world concern for current practical problems choose to work in laboratories and/or with student participants.

> *The purpose of this book is to give assistance, ideas and confidence to those who, for good and honourable reasons, wish to carry out investigations involving people which have this kind of real world focus; to draw attention to some of the issues and complexities involved; and to generate a degree of informed enthusiasm for a particularly challenging and important area of work.*

Design matters

If you don't give serious attention to the *design* of a research project you are likely to end up with a mess. Catherine Hakim likens the designers of research projects to architects who are 'responsible for supervising all subsequent work to implement the design, including that done by quantity surveyors, builders and other specialists who are hired in to help turn the blueprint into a reality' (Hakim, 2000, p. 1). In small-scale real world research, it is common for researchers to combine the role of designer with responsibility for carrying out the project. This should not preclude seeking specialist assistance in areas such as the development of questionnaires or other data collection instruments, or from statisticians or other experts in data analysis.

Social research, that is research which focuses on people in a social setting, has been carried out in many different ways, the more important of which for carrying out real world studies are covered in later chapters. They fall traditionally into two very broad families, commonly referred to as *quantitative research* and *qualitative research*. As the label suggests, quantitative research typically relies on the collection of data in numerical form while in qualitative research data are typically non-numerical, often in the form of words. However, they are shorthand terms for research *paradigms*, each of which has a collection of typical features over and above the type of data collected. They are discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

In a very similar way, social research designs can be divided into two major types or styles. In one style the design of the study is fixed at an early stage of the research process. You have worked out what you are going to do and how you are going to do it in considerable detail before getting down to collecting data. We refer to them as *fixed designs*, and discuss them in detail in Chapter 6. The experiment and the survey, two strong traditions in social research, are the prime examples of this style of research. The second broad strategy is more flexible, in the sense

that while there may be a considerable amount of preliminary planning, details of procedure are not fixed in advance and the focus is liable to change as the research proceeds. Here the detailed design evolves as a result of what is found out in the early stages. We refer to them as *flexible designs*, and discuss them in detail in Chapter 7. There are several popular designs of this type including ones taking an ethnographic approach or using grounded theory.

Many texts refer to what are here called fixed designs as quantitative designs, and flexible ones as qualitative designs. This is because fixed designs almost always depend on the collection of quantitative, numerical data and flexible designs typically rely heavily on the collection of *qualitative data*, usually in the form of words. However, there is no bar on flexible designs involving the collection of *quantitative data*. In practice many real world flexible designs involve the use of two or more data collection methods and it is common to collect at least a small amount of quantitative data. Similarly, there is a case for many fixed designs, while concentrating on the collection of quantitative data, also collecting some qualitative data. More generally, there is a growing interest in *multi-strategy designs*, discussed in Chapter 8, where there is substantial collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in different phases or aspects of the same project.

In some circles, particularly amongst those who are advocates of the increasingly widely advocated evidence-based approaches, there is a strong tendency to regard fixed designs as superior to flexible ones. Experiments, particularly those involving randomized controlled trials (RCTs), are viewed by many as the 'gold standard' for social research, though this view is by no means universal. This issue is discussed in some detail in Chapter 6, p. 117, where the notion of a universally applicable gold standard in the design of social research is questioned.

The requirement for a detailed design in fixed design research is well established. There are clear rules about what is needed in order to carry out the research to a professional standard. To a large extent this involves following tried and tested steps and procedures. Flexible designs are much more difficult to pin down. This is in part because it has only been relatively recently that researchers have given consideration to the design issues which they raise. There had been a tradition in the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology, from which these approaches largely derive, of an 'apprenticeship' model. Skill in their use was developed by working alongside someone already skilled. However, establishing principles for the design of this type of research has excited much interest and generated many publications recently.

At a more general level, quantitative research with its heavy reliance on numerical data and statistical analysis is considered by many of its proponents to be the way to do 'scientific' research. The scientific status of qualitative research is more in dispute. Some proponents of this style of research have no wish to have their research viewed as *science*. As discussed in the next chapter, there are strong arguments for characterizing both types of research as scientific – provided that they are carried out in a systematic, principled fashion.

Evaluation and change

Much research with a real world focus is essentially some form of *evaluation*. Is the organization of educational provision for children with special needs such as learning difficulties, or problems with sight or hearing, working effectively in a particular local authority area? Does a child abuse service actually serve the interests of the children concerned? Can a business improve its interviewing procedures for new sales staff? Evaluation brings to the fore a very different agenda

of issues from those usually associated with 'pure' research. For example, issues to do with change (How can it be implemented? What are the barriers to implementation and how might they be overcome?) often loom large. There are influential approaches within applied social research which regard the support and engineering of change as an integral part of the research process (see Chapter 2, p. 34). However, as Stange and Phillips (2007) warn, in an introduction to a journal issue with a set of studies pointing to the difficulties of introducing change, 'Real change is real hard in the real world'.

Should you, as a researcher, get involved in these aspects? A possible stance is to say that the researcher's responsibility stops with achieving some understanding of what is going on, and then handing that information over to those directly concerned. An alternative is to say that it is part of the researcher's job to use this understanding to suggest ways in which desirable change might take place and perhaps to monitor the effectiveness of these attempts. There are no general solutions to these issues. The answers in each case depend to a considerable extent on the situation in which you find yourself. Certainly someone attempting to carry out research into the situation in which they themselves are working or living may find that the change aspects become virtually impossible to separate out from the research itself.

This mention of what amounts to 'self-evaluation' opens up a Pandora's box. At one extreme, some would doubt the feasibility of insiders taking part in any worthwhile, credible or objective enquiry into a situation in which they are centrally involved. Others advocate approaches such as 'participatory evaluation' (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012), 'participatory action research' (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013), 'collaborative ethnography' (Lassiter, 2005) or 'involving service users in research' (Lowes & Hulatt, 2005) and emphasize the benefits of participation, collaboration and involvement. These texts amply demonstrate the feasibility of such approaches, but the problems and stresses of doing this type of research, and the need for specialists in research and *methodology* have to be recognized. The role that such specialists should take on then becomes an important issue. One thing they need to be able to do is 'give away' skills, an important skill in its own right.

All of which carries with it the implication that the real world researcher needs to have knowledge, skills and expertise in areas outside the likely competence of most academic researchers. How change comes about in individuals and groups is itself an immense research area, some knowledge of which is likely to be helpful if you are involved in its implementation. (Hall & Hord, 2014 provide a practical introduction). For the activist researcher, working for social justice, change is a central concern (Lorenzetti, 2013). For all researchers, a very strong sense of audience is needed to guide the style, content and length of any report or other communication arising from the project. If an important objective is concerned with change, then a report which does not communicate to the decision-makers in that situation is a waste of time.

The audience for this book

Having just stressed the need for a sense of audience when writing, we should make clear for whom this book is written.

After several years teaching courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level which try to deliver real world research skills, we both have been increasingly involved in assisting, through supervision and consultancy, individuals or small groups wishing to carry out some

study, often one directly relevant to the setting in which they work. These have included teachers, social workers, health service professionals, NGOs and charities as well as others working directly with particular client groups (e.g. ex-offenders, vulnerable and disadvantaged populations) as well as professional psychologists and social scientists responsible for providing advice and support to others in both private and public sectors. In carrying out these studies, they are usually seeking to meet some perceived, often pressing, need. We have also been made conscious (partly through responses to the previous editions of this book) of the increasing call for practitioners and professionals in diverse fields such as accountancy, architecture and design, business and management, criminology, and development studies, to carry out empirically based projects, for which many feel inadequately prepared. Such groups form important target audiences.

However, a large section of this book's readership has always been students and academics, which we trust will remain true with the current edition. The book seeks to provide advice to students at all levels and across a range of disciplines. The focus is on the design, carrying out, analysing, interpreting and reporting findings, dissemination and application of real world research. Our aim is to help you get more 'bang for your buck' and produce research with an impact, not least by being picked up by policy-makers.

In part, this is an attempt to arm anyone wishing to use social research methods with tools and expertise that they can both use for themselves and 'give away' to others to use. We also have the hope, based on experience, that practitioners in the helping and caring professions, and others working with people, can usefully enquire into their own and others' practice, with a view to understanding, developing and changing it.

A word to those with a social science background

It is our strong impression that, for carrying out real world research, the exact social science discipline background of the potential researcher is not all that important. A psychology graduate is likely to have been well steeped in experimental design and to know relatively little about qualitative approaches (although such approaches are now being taken seriously by an increasing proportion of departments). A sociology graduate will be likely to have had the reverse experience. The approach taken in this book is deliberately promiscuous. Strategies and techniques which have tended to be linked to different disciplines have been brought together in an attempt to give researchers a range of options appropriate to the research questions they are asking. Hence it is hoped that those from a range of social science disciplines will find material which is both useful and accessible. This book's multi-disciplinary approach to methodology in the *social sciences* becomes more relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the expansion of the range of methods and methodological approaches explored by disciplines including criminology, politics and social work. Secondly, the encouragement of *stakeholders*, funding bodies and research councils to engage in cross-disciplinary research.

A word to those without a social science background

Our experience is that the approaches advocated here can be accessible to those without a background or training in the social sciences. The things that social researchers do are not all that different from those in a variety of other trades and professions. Northmore (1996) for example,

writing for investigative journalists, reveals many similarities. The research task has been compared with that of the detective: information is gathered; a 'case' is made on the basis of evidence; comparisons are made with the *modus operandi* of suspects; decisions are made about the best explanation, etc. (Scriven, 1976; Smith & Davis, 2012). There are more obvious linkages with the helping professions such as therapists, counsellors, etc. and with humanities disciplines such as history.

A problem is that you 'know not what it is that you know not' and may rush in blindly or blithely without realizing the complexity of the situation. Our advice is that you seek to appreciate the implications of carrying out a *scientific* study. If you are not from a scientific background, or are 'anti-science', please try to keep your prejudices in check. The next chapter aims, among other things, to clear away some common misconceptions about the scientific approach. You won't be expected to wear a white coat, or, necessarily, to crunch numbers.

Associated with the scientific approach is the need for rigour and for rules or principles of procedure. However, as has already been stressed, many real world studies both permit and require a flexibility in design and prosecution which may well appeal to those with a background in the arts or humanities. Well-written flexible research designs based on people's accounts or other qualitative data can provide a compelling report. A major theme of this book is how to introduce rigour into all aspects of research so that we achieve a justified believability and *trustworthiness* in what we find and write up.

You will be at a disadvantage compared to those with a social science background in two main ways. First, the carrying out of systematic research calls for a set of skills – for example, in observing and interviewing, designing, analysing, interpreting and reporting. The development of these skills requires practice, which takes time. This can and should have taken place during training in most social science subjects but in the absence of these skills, you will have to learn 'on the job' or to sub-contract some or all of the tasks to others who do have the necessary skills.

Second, and more difficult to remedy, the social sciences have a substantive content of philosophical underpinning, theories, *models* and findings which in general you will not be aware of. It is difficult to assess how much of a disadvantage this puts you under. One obvious solution is to work in partnership, or on some kind of consultancy basis, with a professional social researcher. This practice is becoming more commonplace with numerous NGOs, organizations and individuals linking up with universities and academics to develop, as well as conduct, mutually beneficial research. If you are a practitioner or professional, trained and experienced in the field which is the subject of the research, then you will have a corresponding, and possibly more useful, set of theories, models, etc. to those deriving from the 'pure' social science disciplines. This is not to minimize the importance of theory. It simply makes the point that a theoretical or conceptual framework can be acquired by a variety of means (including interaction with, and analysis of, the data you have collected). When, as will often be the case, the intention is to assist individuals, groups or organizations to understand, and possibly develop or change, some aspect of themselves and the situation in which they find themselves, there is virtue in staying close to the concepts and language they use. Certainly, unassimilated jargon often accentuates the commonly acknowledged theory/practice divide.

The basic claim being made here is that principled enquiry can be of help in gaining an understanding of the human situation and its manifestations in an office, factory, school, hospital or wherever, and in initiating sensible change and development via evaluation or small-scale research. It is important not to claim too much, however. Common sense, management fiat, hunches, committee meetings, political considerations and the like are going to continue to form