



# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RESEARCH...

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## WHO IS THIS FOR?

This information is intended for people working in the housing sector who need to do research either as part of their work or as part of an academic qualification that is related to it. Whilst it is not intended to replace formal guidelines from your academic institution, it is intended to give a basic outline of the research process and some of the things you will need to consider in putting together a research project.

## WHY DO RESEARCH?

There are many reasons to do research. Academic research is done to prove or disprove a theory, medical research is done to advance knowledge and create treatments, housing research is done to understand what is happening in the sector and to improve and influence policy and practice. The bottom line is that research is done to advance knowledge in a given area.

Research is the planning and implementation of a deliberate strategy to gain information.

## ACADEMIC, POLICY AND PRACTICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

There are different types of research for different purposes. Academic research is largely carried out to prove or disprove a theory to advance knowledge. Policy and practice research is carried out to improve our understanding of what is happening and inform our responses (this is the usual type of research that policy research teams engage in). Evaluative research is carried out to see how well a given policy measure is working or not.

## THE ROLE OF THEORY IN RESEARCH

The role of theory in research is three-fold. Theory can be used as a paradigm, a lens or as new knowledge. Theory can either inform the way we think about things, the framework that we apply our ideas to, or inform how we look at a given problem. For example the theory of evolution explains how humans evolved from less advanced life forms by small incremental adaptations to the external environment - and we can apply this theory to development of housing policy or anything that develops in small incremental stages to adapt to external factors.

We may also find (through research) that things are not as we thought, we can update existing theories or put forward new theories to explain this.

## PLANNING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT & CHOOSING RESEARCH METHODS

Questions you should ask yourself...

- What is the problem I want to solve and what do I need to know?
- What would be good data to have in order to find this out?
- Where will I get this data from?
- Is there existing knowledge in this area that I can use to inform my research strategy and conclusions?
- How will I gather the data I need?
- How will I present the data for my audience?



## RESEARCH METHODS

Broadly speaking there are 3 ways of researching - quantitative, qualitative and mixed method.

### 1. QUANTITATIVE DATA

Quantitative data is data that is based upon numbers or counting the incidence of a given event e.g. answers to closed survey questions, measurements from experiments, use of statistics. Quantitative methods focus on trends in datasets, counting and measuring things, for example, the number of tenancies that fail in the first twelve months; rent payment trends or the profile of people with rent arrears.

### 2. QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data is data based on interpreting the content of interviews, documents and other non-numeric data. Qualitative methods focus on gathering data and using concepts and to interpret what is happening. Qualitative methods are intended to give a "voice" to the subjects of your research. An example of this would be interviewing customers about their experience or about the effects of the government's benefit cap.

### 3. MIXED METHODS

This combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods into one strategy e.g. a survey mixed with interviews to help explain the survey results. The advantage of this is that it makes the most of both types and can cancel out the weaknesses. However, just using both methods is not enough. The two must be linked together explicitly in the research design - this is called "triangulation".

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Whatever methods you are using, the research process is the same.

- Identify the problem, hypothesis or research question - what is it you want to know?
- Gather data to demonstrate what is happening

There are many sources of data you can use. The main ones are:

- Documentary - this may be in the form of previous research papers, books, newspapers, magazines, blogs and increasingly tweets and other social media posts
- Statistical - the government, charities and others publish their own statistics from their own research
- Your own field research

## FIELD RESEARCH

There are a number of ways that you can gather data for your research. The methods you use will depend on what you are trying to find out and the type of data you want. This extract from Birmingham University's website (<http://socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/methodologies.html>) show the main methods you might use.



## QUANTITATIVE DATA

Quantitative data may result from non-participant observations or other measurements (e.g. in an experimental design). Also, sometimes data that are collected through qualitative processes (participant observation, interviews) are coded and quantified. Here are some common quantitative data collection methods and their definitions:

SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRES	A series of questions that the respondent answers on their own. Self-completion questionnaires are good for collecting data on relatively simple topics, and for gaining a general overview of an issue. Questionnaires need to have clear questions, an easy to follow design, and not be too long.
STRUCTURED REVIEWS	Similar to a self-completion questionnaire, except that the questions that are asked by an interviewer to the interviewee. The same questions are read out in the same way to all respondents. There will typically be a fixed choice of answers for the respondents.
STRUCTURED OBSERVATION	Watching people and recording their behaviour systematically. Prior to the observation, an observation schedule will be produced which details what exactly the researcher should look for and how those observations should be recorded.

## QUALITATIVE DATA

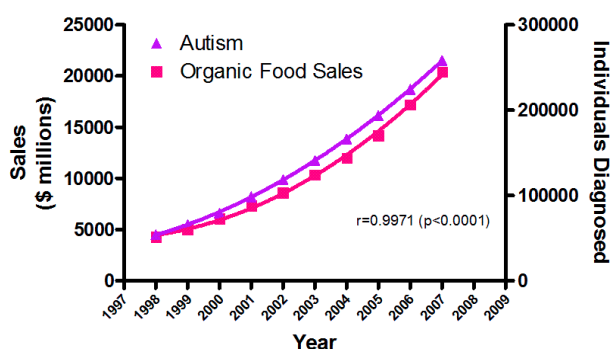
If you are conducting a qualitative analysis you are likely to wish to use at least some original material. This may be collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation recordings and field notes, non-participant observation, or some combination of these. Below are some data collection methods that you might want to use for your dissertation:

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS	A way of asking questions which allows the interviewee to have more control of the interview. The interview could be semi-structured, which uses an interview schedule to keep some control of the interview, but also allows for some flexibility in terms of the interviewee's responses. The interview could be unstructured, here the aim is to explore the interviewee's feelings about the issue being explored and the style of questioning is very informal. Or the interview could be a life history where the interviewer tries to find out about the whole life, or a portion of the person's life.
FOCUS GROUPS	A form of interviewing where there are several participants; there is an emphasis in the questioning on a tightly defined topic; the accent is on interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning. The moderator tries to provide a relatively free rein to the discussion.
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	This involves studying people in naturally occurring settings. The researcher participates directly in the setting and collects data in a systematic manner. The researcher will observe behaviour, listen to conversations, and ask questions.

- **Analyse the data** (where we test the hypothesis)  
This is where you look at all the data you have gathered and test your hypothesis
- **Conclusion**  
This is where you use the results of the analysis to determine your course of action, write your policy and amend your practice.
- **Repetition**  
The hallmark of really good research is that it can be replicated with the same result on multiple occasions. This is more likely to be true of research based on a controlled laboratory experiment, where outside influences are removed. For example medical research often involves repeated, randomised experiments with a control group to check for effects that aren't caused by the experiment.

## A WORD ABOUT USING STATISTICS

You need to be careful when using statistics because sometimes it can look like there is a link between two (or more) things when there isn't really. For example,



Sources: Organic Trade Association, 2011 Organic Industry Survey; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), OMB# 1820-0043. \*Children with Disabilities Receiving Special Education Under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

This chart shows a correlation between the incidence of autism and the sales of organic food (in \$). But we couldn't conclude that

eating organic food causes autism from this. Correlation is not causation.

Fortunately there are a number of statistical tests that we can carry out to find out if there are significant links between two variables. The most common of these are t-tests, the chi-square test and regression analysis. The first two are fairly simple and can be carried out by most people (there are web-based calculators that will do this for you), regression analysis is more complex and requires greater expertise.

## PRESENTING YOUR RESEARCH

Once the hard job of doing your research is done, you still have to present it in a way that will be useful to your audience. This will largely depend on who they are and what your research is being used for. For example, most universities have fairly strict rules about how a research project should be presented e.g. the number of words, spacing, font and format. But if the research is for a PhD in applied maths or dance, it might be appropriate for the thesis to be a few pages of equations or a final performance piece. So you need to ask yourself:

- Who is your audience?
- What format will they require?





## REFERENCING & PLAGIARISM

If you reference other people's work or publications in your research you need to acknowledge where you got it from. Not doing so in a professional setting is bad practice but probably won't get you in trouble. In an academic setting plagiarism is treated very seriously and might result in exclusion from a course or your work being discounted from your final grade. Most institutions now use a piece of software called Turnitin that automatically checks your work against a database – so it is important to reference properly and fully.

The most popular referencing is called "Harvard". In this style you reference a publication as follows:

### BOOKS

Author surname and first initial (year) Title in italics, publisher, city of publication e.g.

***Denscombe, M (2010) The Good Research Guide for small scale research projects, Open University Press, Maidenhead***

### JOURNAL ARTICLES

Author surname and first initial (year) article title in italics, journal title (volume:edition), page number prefixed with pp. e.g.

***Wright, S (2016) Conceptualising the active welfare subject: welfare reform in discourse, policy and lived experience, Politics and Policy (44:2) pp.235-52***

If there are two authors you will need to put both e.g.

***Fitzpatrick, S & Watts, B (2010) etc.***

If there are more than two authors you only need put the first author's name (as given in the publication) followed by "et al" (meaning "and others").

***Fitzpatrick, S et al (2010) etc.***

These references usually appear in a bibliography at the end of your report but you can also reference books and articles in this style as footnotes (at the bottom of a page) or endnotes (at the end of the section or chapter).

## REFERENCING TWEETS

You can now reference social media as evidence of opinions/policy for example if a politician tweets about welfare policy, you can use that to strengthen your argument. The reference for a tweet would be as follows:

Name or organisation. Year. Title (give the tweet as your title). Twitter plus the date of the tweet. URL and date it was accessed e.g.

***Dougill, Andy. 2013. Energising development with *Jatropha curcas*? Biofuel reflections from Mali in @PracticalAction briefing paper [Twitter]. 16 April. Available from: <https://twitter.com/AndyDougill> [Accessed: 8 September 2013].***

You can also reference Facebook posts and other social media, just change the reference and URL accordingly.



## NOTE

This advice on referencing is based upon strict rules about academic work and writing a dissertation/thesis. When you are writing for a business or other report there is more flexibility about how you can reference...the important thing is that you do!

## WHAT WORD CAN DO FOR YOU

The presentation of your research can be made easier by using some of the in-built tools available in Microsoft Word. Although there are many of these, the main ones that will help you are the ability to automatically generate:

- A contents page (with page numbers)
- Lists of tables/figures (with page numbers)

Just remember that these do not automatically update when you change your document - but it is easy to do it manually. The "Help" function on Word will be able to tell you how to do these things.

## RESEARCH ETHICS AND BIAS

Ethics are the rules that we use as researchers to make sure that no one comes to harm as a result of the research that we carry out. These are particularly important when we are working with people who are considered to be vulnerable - this might happen quite often in a housing context. Some of the standard rules that you should follow might be,

- Ensure that you get written consent from the individual to participate in the research

- Keep participants in your research anonymous and only identify them with their express written consent to do so
- Use an independent chaperone or advocate if you are working with someone who is vulnerable - this may especially be required where subjects have learning difficulties or mental health problems
- If you are conducting interviews or focus groups, these can be recorded with the permission of those involved - this can protect both you and them
- As a general rule people participating in research should consent to do so - there may be times when this is not possible but subjects must be fully debriefed afterwards and give consent for material concerning them to be used

## BIAS

Bias is the name given to way that the attitudes of the researcher can influence their findings - this is especially an issue in social research. The best we can do is to be aware of our biases and not allow them to colour the way we see things - and try to remain impartial. For example, in a survey or interview we must be careful to not word questions so as to influence the responses. For example,

***Why do you think government policy has been so terrible over the last 10 years?***

Could be reworded as,

***What do you think about government policy over the last 10 years? Why is that?***



## USEFUL BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

Denscombe, M (2010) *The Good Research Guide for small scale research projects* (4th Edition), Open University Press, Maidenhead

Denscombe, M (2009) *Ground Rules for Social Research* (2nd Edition), Open University Press, Maidenhead

Robertson, D (2008) *Looking Into Housing: A practical guide to housing research*, CIH, Coventry (This is now out of print but may be available in libraries or on eBay or Amazon.)

## USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be a good source of information for researchers, following prominent politicians and organisations is a great way to keep up to date. Some of the accounts you might find useful to follow are:

@YouGov - polling information

@HouseofCommons

@HouseofLords

@GOVUK

@UKParliament

@theSRAorg - The Social Research Association

@LGAnews - the Local Government Association

@HSAUK - the Housing Studies Association

@UKLabour

@Conservatives

@LibDems

@CrisisHousing

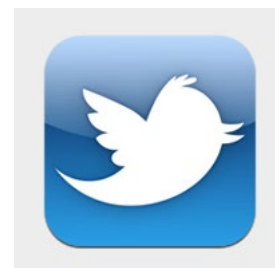
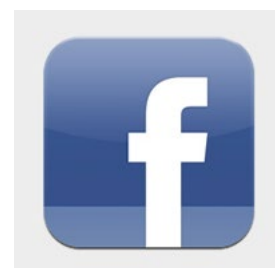
@ONS - the Office for National Statistics

@CIHhousing - the Chartered Institute of Housing

@IpsosMORI - a leading polling organisation

@Resfoundation - a think tank working to improve the live of people on low/middle incomes

@Shelter







## USEFUL WEBSITES

There are also a number of useful websites to keep an eye on including:

<http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/commons/commonslibrary/>

The House of Commons library produces useful briefings on a range of topics pulling together information from a variety of sources

<http://the-sra.org.uk/>

The Social Research Association – the membership body for social researchers

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-communities-and-local-government/about/statistics>

This is where you will find government data on a range of topics including homelessness, housebuilding and other topics

<http://www.ukhousingreview.org.uk/>

Commentary and a wide ranging compendium of housing related statistics

<https://www.crisis.org.uk/>

A leading campaign organisation on homelessness

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/>

A leading campaign organisation on social issues e.g. poverty and housing – also produces a range of research reports

[https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/organisations/centre-for-housing-policy\(f63d2060-ae0c-4533-b4b7-2a3aceadf2f6\).html](https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/organisations/centre-for-housing-policy(f63d2060-ae0c-4533-b4b7-2a3aceadf2f6).html)

The Centre for Housing Policy at York University (a leading academic centre for the study of housing)

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/schools/energy-geoscience-infrastructure-society/research/i-sphere.htm>

Website of I-sphere at Heriot-Watt University – another leading academic centre for housing research