2 What is Methodology?

CHAPTER CONTENTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By studying the contents of this chapter and doing the activities you will:

- be able to articulate what is meant by the term 'methodology'
- eliminate confusion between 'methods' and 'methodology'
- understand why methodological issues are important considerations for your own research study
- understand the central role of 'research questions'
- be able to compose and justify your own research questions
- write some 300 or so words which you can later use to discuss your research questions and the methodological justification for the mode of enquiry you have chosen to investigate them.

What do we mean by 'methodology'?

A methodology shows how research questions are articulated with questions asked in the field. Its effect is a claim about significance ...

This chapter addresses an issue which many people coming new to research find confusing, and that is the difference between methods and methodology. We suggest that, at its simplest, this distinction can be seen in terms of *methods* as being some of the ingredients of research, whilst *methodology* provides the *reasons* for using a particular research recipe.

The chapter explores the relationship of methods and methodology, and the ongoing task of *justification* which a methodology represents. Thus methodology starts quite simply by asking questions such as: '*Why* interview?', '*Why* carry out a questionnaire survey?' and '*Why* interview 25 rather than 500 participants?' Decisions such as these are apparently often practical, but they carry very deep, often unarticulated, implications. They are often based on values and assumptions which influence the study, and as such therefore need to be fully interrogated in order to clarify the research decisions which are made. The implications of research decisions are often not fully realised (or perhaps realised too late, when data have already been collected). They are often unexplained, and in many cases poorly justified.

Activity 2.1 What is methodology?

Write a short definition of what you understand by *methodology*. We will return to your definition later in the chapter.

'The arrest of experience'

Research puts common experience into brackets, makes 'objects' of experience so that they can be examined and understood. One of the things which research requires people to do is to question assumptions and perceptions which are taken for granted in the normal run of everyday life; Michael Oakeshott (1933) described this as an 'arrest of experience', when we try to step outside our everyday experience of people, objects and places, and subject them to different sorts of examination. Oakeshott reminds us that 'Nature is the *product* not the evidence of scientific thought' (1933: 191). The information becomes, then, not the *consequence* of a way of seeing even, but that *act* itself (an 'object'), and as such must

be intentionally opposed to the thing in itself. In this opposition we discover the *nature of the particular*. For science attempts to conceive of the world in defined categories and its datum has the required stability only by virtue of the categorical set of which it is an indifferent member. There can, by this definition, be no such scientific experience as that *of the particular*.

Whatever actual methods are ultimately employed in a study, we suggest that the 'arrest of experience' – present in all research studies – can be characterised by four forms of *radical enquiry*. These are *radical looking, radical listening, radical reading* and *radical questioning*.

Radical looking

Radical looking is the means by which research process makes the familiar strange, and gaps in knowledge are revealed.

What we mean by *radical looking* is exploration beyond the familiar and the (personally) known, to the roots of a situation: this is *exploration which makes the familiar strange*.

All researchers need to develop the capacity to see their topic with new and different lenses, in order to look beyond and transform their own current knowledge. Topics present themselves for research in different ways, and for all sorts of different reasons. What distinguishes research from everyday interest or curiosity, however, is the opening up of familiar things to alternative ways of seeing. Thus an *interest* in, say, adolescent drug culture only starts to become *research* proper when that curiosity is *systematically informed by perspectives outside of the researcher's normal vision*: what is already known about this topic? What have other researchers found? Are there policy contexts which affect this culture? What do adolescents themselves think about the situation? And, most importantly, what are the gaps and can I add to the public state of knowledge?

Answers to these – and many other such – questions do not simply describe the situation under enquiry, filling in informational blanks, as it were. They actually refine and define the topic: this sort of radical looking at others' knowledge allows researchers to examine and then start to discard information as they begin to focus on a particular problem, a particular *gap in knowledge*. Thus, to stay with the example above, there may be a great deal of relevant work on adolescent drug culture, and it is necessary to be critically aware of this. However, by definition nobody will have carried out your particular study with *these* kids *this* year and in *this* town.

In Chapter 3 we present an example of a research study which illustrates what we mean by 'looking' and interpret the theme both in terms of *radical looking* and some methods of *observation* and their interpretation.

Radical listening

Radical listening – as opposed to merely hearing – is the interpretative and critical means through which 'voice' is noticed.

What we mean by *radical listening* is a careful attention to all the *voices* which may be heard within and around any given topic. These include both the (literal) voices of research subjects – in interview, for example – and also the voices which are at work in other research reports. This is really part of the same process as radical looking, but it adds emphasis to our view (outlined in Chapter 1) of social research as characteristically *positional* and *political*.

Radical listening, then, involves working out *positionality*. This means trying to understand something of what lies behind what is said by research subjects and written by other researchers; trying to understand this in terms of the speaker's/author's intentions; and trying to understand what this means within their particular social frameworks. If you accept our argument in Chapter 1 that all research is political, then it follows that whatever evidence you take from research subjects, or other research writers, embodies a particular political position (however implicit this may be). This is what we mean here by 'voice'.

Activity 2.2

Make some notes about:

- What counts as 'voice'?
- Why do you want to listen?
- What do you want to hear?
- Do you want to listen to what you hear?

The articulation of responses to the above questions will provide you with your rationale for the *methods* of listening which you choose to use in your own studies.

The following example is from a student dissertation.

> This study explores the issue of consumer 'voice' in a Day Care Centre for adults with learning difficulties. Whilst the Centre has a Management Committee on which consumers are represented,

a) Many 'important' decisions are taken outside of this body;
b) Consumers' views are frequently 'mediated' by carers;
c) Meetings are often cancelled when the carers believe there is insufficient matter of importance.

The study examines the rhetoric of Consumer Participation (which is a much-vaunted item in the Centre's publicity) and sets this against a reality exposed by one-to-one 'unmediated' interviews with seven consumers. The study concludes that there is a number of 'voices' at work in the Centre, both literal and metaphorical, but that the 'voice' of the consumers is muted if not powerless.

The methodological issues raised by the decision to collect and analyse data which elicit many voices of participants are important. Whether carrying out ethnographic studies or large surveys which involve listening to others' voices in research studies, the justification for listening to a range of voices in a variety of dimensions must be made clear. We shall see more of this in Chapter 4, which includes an example of a study designed to elicit a number of voices. In this example the methodological 'frame' is as interesting as the substantive 'findings' (or outcomes) of the research. Radical listening, we suggest, should be central to any form of research whatever its substantive content or paradigm.

Radical reading

Radical reading provides the justification for the critical adoption or rejection of existing knowledge and practices.

In Chapter 1 we showed how social research is *purposive* and *positional*, and we see *radical reading* as a process which exposes the purposes and positions of texts and practices. In this way we are using 'reading' both in a traditional sense – as addressing written texts – and in the metaphorical sense – 'How do *you* read this or that situation?' This process is inseparable from *radical looking* and *radical listening*, but what distinguishes *radical reading* is the notion of *criticality*.

Criticality – 'being critical' – describes the attempt to show *on what terms* 'personal' and 'public' knowledges are jointly articulated – and therefore where their *positional* differences lie.

A critical account of anything seeks to be *rational*, but cannot fail to reflect the values and beliefs of its author; the most *persuasive* critical accounts reveal the full range of values at work in the analysis.

We shall return to this theme in Chapter 5 with a discussion of the centrality to the research process of the literature search and review and of the less formal 'readings' of the research settings which researchers inevitably make.

Radical questioning

Radical questioning reveals not only gaps in knowledge but also why and how particular answers might be morally and politically necessitated.

Radical questioning lies at the heart of a thesis, and brings together the earlier notions of *radically attending* to a topic or situation or events.

All researchers ask questions. They ask sometimes 'innocent' and 'naive' questions about their research focus, as well as searching questions about their data, their processes on analysis, their ethical positions and their moral intent. Research methodology involves, as a minimum, three kinds of questioning activity: personal questions, research questions and field questions.

Personal questions. Researchers must ask questions of themselves about what drives their research and the location of themselves in their research.

Research questions. The careful formulation of 'research questions' – which form the major planks of any research study – is key to the realisation of a successful research study, however large or small.

Field questions. These are quite literally questions which are asked 'in the field'. The formulation of these empirical questions follows the development of research questions and planned acts of data collection in the field should always be directly related to the research questions.

Of course, some research studies will also involve the questioning of research participants, in which case there are further decisions to be made, in terms of: who to ask; what to ask; when to ask; going back again (re-asking); being specific; being open. These form the fine detail of field questions.

In the acts of looking, listening, reading and asking it is also important for researchers to 'get the feel' of their research settings and situations. They need to be sensitive to 'hunches' which they might later investigate, or which might alert them to the need for particular responses to situations. In suggesting that researchers 'feel' their settings we are arguing the need for a holistic response to research design. Chapter 6 further develops these themes.

Activity 2.3

Consider the functions of looking, listening, reading and questioning in relation to your own (proposed) research study. Which of these tasks might presently seem to have more prominence in your own research?

Do you think that the idea of 'feeling' your research setting has any valid function in the context of your particular study? Make a few notes in your research journal before you move on. You may wish to add to your notes on these topics as you work through the book.

Philomena T's interest was in career choices in women returning to work after raising a family. In her response to Activity 2.3, she wrote in her research diary:

> I think this study is mostly about listening. I'm not aware (at the moment) of much that's been done systematically about this topic, but what I have come across is mainly survey-based stuff like data from the census etc. What I want to do is quite simply listen; let them guide me as it were – I don't have any pre-conceived ideas about the issues or any set questions … I like that idea of 'feeling the setting' – also of feeling my way around first of all …

Distinguishing between 'methods' and 'methodology'

> The job of *method* is only to 'hold apart' the researcher and her objects, so that we can tell the difference between them. Methods do not tell us what the thing is; they do not even describe it. All they tell us is the circumstances under which the researcher met the object; and they normally seek to provide a guarantee that researcher and object are distinct from each other. 'Postmodern' accounts say it is impossible to do this.

First we shall discuss the relationship between research methods and methodology, and argue that one of the tasks for a methodology is to explain and justify the particular methods used in a given study.

> Selection of methods may be an act of faith rather than a rational response to a clearly formulated problem. The method may even be an intrinsic part of the problem, rather than extrinsic and disconnected from it. Just as recipes are not simply things that are done to food, but become concepts within which method and substance are compounded, so 'method' in research can become an intrinsic part of the project. The methods we choose are, in this sense, there to be tested, just as much as the substantive hypothesis. (Walker, 1985: 87)

In a sense – a common sense – there is not a great deal to say about research methods as such; they are in the end tools, no more, and we may appear to take them from the shelf when we need them.

But methods only – and this is crucial – *only* arise in the service of quite particular needs and purposes. Their usefulness falls away if and as these needs are met and these purposes fulfilled. To be sure, as critical readers of a research report we may wish to know how such and such an insight was arrived at, and hence we may check the researcher's claims to validity and reliability, say, by asking questions of her method. But if the work ultimately has significance for us, it is because its quite particular purpose has been achieved; and to do this, it will have called on the construction of quite particular tools.

It is for this reason that the idea of method as an indifferent tool is seldom borne out by the experience of researchers. A method turns out not to be a spanner – or even a micrometer – but rather something which has to be painstakingly custom-built from other drafters' cast-offs which, whilst providing a general guidance, were not made *for this particular job*. It is actually this particularity which it becomes the task of methodology to explain.

'Choosing' methods?

It is true – if a truism – that channels of communication determine what may pass along them. Research methods observe this rule. A statistical survey, for example, generates one particular form of information at the expense of others, and you would not normally expect to learn much about the *experience* of respondents from this sort of enquiry. Alternatively, an ethnographic study may tell you a great deal about the culture of any given situation and the people involved in it, but you would not easily be able to infer *generalities* about *other* situations from this sort of data.

However, in delimiting the sorts of information which may be accessed, channels of communication – in this case, particular research methods – represent (though often tacitly) differing views on how the world is constructed and how it operates.

Let us take an example of the genesis and development of a piece of research; let us say, for argument's sake, that we wish to find out about the political consciousness of 16–18-year-old students in a tertiary college. Now there is clearly a number of ways in which we could do this, though it would be hard to avoid using one or more from a choice of interview, questionnaire and observation techniques. But the point is that the choice of method will itself depend on much earlier, often tacit, decision-making processes about the *nature* of *knowledge itself*. Are we to assume, for example, that the political beliefs held by our subjects are something which are more or less ready to hand, and which require merely the right question – the appropriate cue – to bring them to expression, and to record? Alternatively, might we assume that a political belief is something which may well be latent, requiring extended and almost certainly interactive interviewing to

bring it to light not only to the researcher, but to the subjects themselves? And, in any event, can there be such a thing as context-free and enduring political beliefs, or are they rather tied to specific events?

Or take a different set of questions: however should we select whoever it is we want to interview or issue with a questionnaire or whatever? Why him and not her? Why 25 rather than 105? Or – from later moments in the process of carrying out the research – what will 'count' as evidence, and what be 'discounted'?

And what about our part in the design and carrying out of this study? Can we be 'neutral', be 'objective'? And should we?

Partial answers to all these and the many more questions will be found as functions of our choice of methods; but the coherence and – above all – power to persuade others of our research will derive ultimately from the *painstaking justification we offer for the decisions we have made.*

Activity 2.4

You want to find out the views of employers on employing young people with a criminal record. How will you approach the task?

Will you interview? How many? Who? Where?
Will you carry out a questionnaire survey by post? How many? Who? Where?

Using the ideas in Figure 2.1 begin to make some of the research decisions identified above. In the process you will make decisions based on the kinds of information you want and the values you identify as important. Do you want the information to be 'slight' or 'deep' – such a decision will directly impact on your research decisions.

Make some notes on your planned strategy and, importantly, *why* you make particular research decisions.

By way of example, we have plotted two studies onto Figure 2.2. In the first, Page (2005) wanted to learn how three leading researchers in the field consider issues of working with babies and toddlers (study a); on the other hand Weisel and Dror (2006) carried out a survey of attitudes towards inclusion in schools (study b). These two studies asked different questions and their researchers made different decisions about the depth of knowledge they were seeking, which in turn influenced the form of data and quantity of data they would plan to collect.

'Deep'

Viewpo
coverag

'Slight'

Figure 2.

'Deep'

Viewpoir
coverage

'Slight'

a Page (2005
b Weisel and

Figure 2.2 F

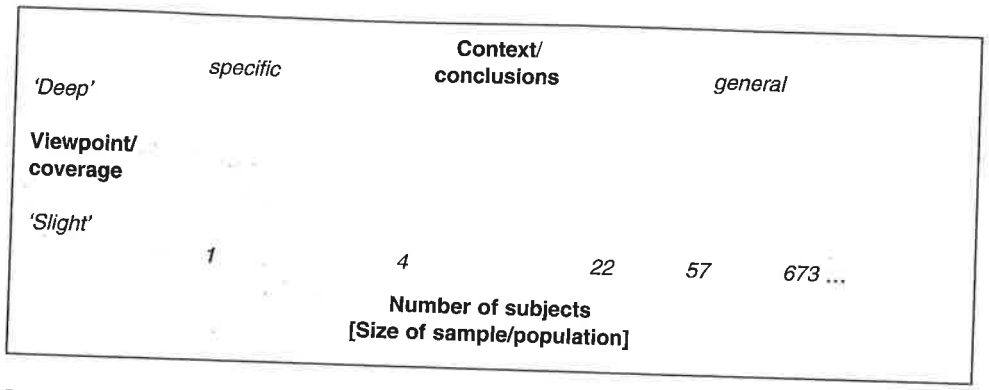
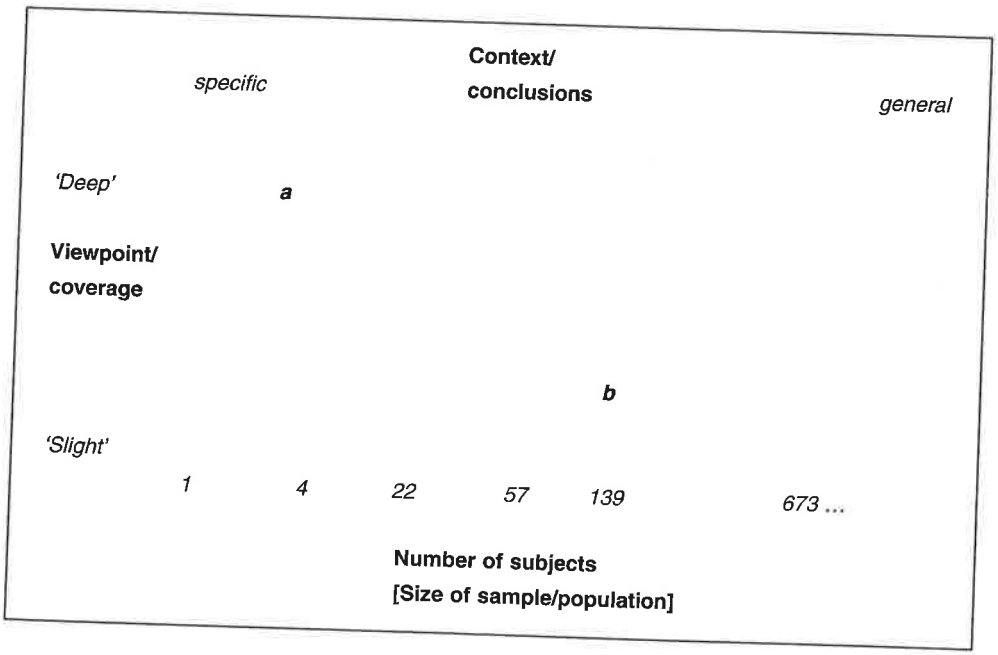


Figure 2.1 Factors to consider in making research decisions



a Page (2005) A study of the views of three leading academics ... . N=3

b Weisel and Dror (2006) School climate efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion n=139

Figure 2.2 Factors to consider in making research decisions: two examples

So, we suggest that it is not so much a case of 'choosing' methods as 'making' specifically crafted tools for a specifically generated set of questions which respond to a particular 'problem'. This theme will be addressed through various examples in the book.

What is methodology for?

A methodology shows how research questions are articulated with questions asked in the field. Its effect is a claim about significance.

Trying to produce a definitive definition of methodology as used in the social sciences, and to serve the purposes of all researchers' is rather like trying to catch water in a net. Different researchers offer slightly differing definitions according to their own training, discipline and purposes. Thus Kaplan sees the aim of methodology to be:

> to describe and analyse ... methods, throwing light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their suppositions and consequences, relating their potentialities to the twilight zone at the frontiers of knowledge. It is to venture generalisations from the success of particular techniques, suggesting new applications, and to unfold the specific bearings of logical and metaphysical principles on concrete problems, suggesting new formulations. (1973: 93)

Miles and Huberman on the other hand, emphasise 'puzzlement' in pointing to the role of methodology:

> In our survey of qualitative researchers, we asked about issues that were unclear and puzzling. One researcher replied: 'Everything is unclear and puzzling ... Improved methodology, however, raises confidence to a much more significant plane and provides a more certain base (though not an absolute one) for action'. (1994: 3)

And they continue to argue for transparency in research processes:

> It is not just that we must somehow 'please' our critical colleague audiences; the deeper issue is avoiding self-delusion. After that we can turn to the task of being honest with our readers about how we did the study, and what worried us about its quality. Without such methodological frankness, we run the risk of reporting 'knowledge that ain't so'. (Ibid.: 294)

Different again in terms of scope is the requirement of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 73) that: 'Research design is governed by the notion of "fitness for purpose". The purposes of the research determine the methodology and design of the research.'

However, for all their differences, these and other definitions of methodology (see Appendix II) share a common idea of *justification*. This is why, in our own definition, we do not emphasise a conceptual essence for the term, but rather suggest an operational description which will be positively useful in justifying any given research design.

Traditionally, for philosophers the twin terms of methodology are ontology and epistemology, understood as the study of being and of knowing respectively. Basically, an ontology is a theory of what exists and how it exists, and an epistemology is a related theory of how we can come to know those things. For a philosopher these are specialist, complex and profound fields of enquiry, but their importance is not restricted to philosophical enquiry, though their relevance at the point of setting out on an empirical research activity may not seem immediate.

Indeed, if every research thesis had to elaborate its ontological and epistemological background, then the wheel would truly be endlessly reinvented. However, if we examine any piece of empirical research, it is clear that there are at work a great many assumptions about what the world is, how it works and how we can claim to know these things.

Activity 2.5 What assumptions do you make?

In your research journal respond to these questions about the assumptions which underpin your study. (Clearly the extent to which you can respond to the following questions will depend on the stage you have reached in your own study.)

- What assumptions about the topic are inevitably present in the way I conceive of the study?
- What specific questions – in the light of my assumptions – am I asking in this particular study, and which events and circumstances prompted them and gave them a particular urgency?
- Why and how did these assumptions, questions and circumstances suggest or require the particular methods which I chose?
- What assumptions about 'how the world operates' – and how we can know it – are given with these methods?

(continued)

(Continued)

- Why, then, are they particularly suitable for investigating the phenomena in question?
- How did the process of my research change or qualify my assumptions? In what ways am I changed by the research?
- And in what ways is the community's understanding changed by what I have achieved? If research actually defines the field, what redefinition (however small) is suggested in my work?
- What might another researcher learn from my experience?

For example, we return to Emily's developing study of youths with anti-social behaviour orders. This is what Emily wrote in response to Activity 2.5:

> Assumptions I am making about my ASBO study:
>
> I am assuming that some young people with (and without) ASBOs will be prepared to talk to me, that enough people are fired up enough about the whole topic to spare time to talk. Specific questions relate, really, to self image of the young people with ASBOs and it is the media hype and OTT coverage that has really given me the 'burn' to base my EdD around this.
>
> Methods: hanging out I think, ethnography of a kind, but also talking, interviewing, getting some trust, but various forms of face to face talking. Unstructured, and as far as I can, without prejudice ... I'm assuming here that people will talk to me and tell me things 'how they are' but there may be a bit of telling me what they think I want to hear or even talking to shock me! I'll need to sort this out, could be quite tangled. I do think this will make some sort of contribution to understanding, it will give an insight into young people's perspectives. I want, above all, to understand the 'currency' of the ASBO, what it means to have one 'on the street' (and not to have one). Ethical minefield in view ... tread with care! Wear protective clothing! Be prepared for a new language.

It is the task of methodology to uncover and justify research assumptions as far and as practicably as possible, and in so doing to locate the claims which the research makes within the traditions of enquiry which use it. Equally, it is our task, as researchers, to identify our research tools and our rationale for their selection.

We have developed our operational definition from our own work with research students who, in time-constrained studies for higher degree awards, are not immediately concerned with the fine print of the epistemological and ontological foundations of their studies!

However, it is our experience that the really successful – that is, the *persuasive* – studies are those which demonstrate a clear, logical and reflexive relationship between research questions and field questions. Further, this relationship is not one which is articulated only or largely in a so-called 'methodology chapter', but one which is *evident throughout the work*. The relationship of research questions to literature review is a matter of methodology; the relationship of literature review to fieldwork is a methodological issue; the relationship of the fieldwork to the analysis of data is a methodological concern; the relationship of the framework for analysis to the research report is methodological.

> At the heart of all these interwoven research activities are endless processes of selection; and in constantly justifying this selection, a 'good methodology' is more *a critical design attitude* to be found always at work throughout a study, rather than confined within a brief chapter called 'Methodology'.

But what does this mean in practice? How might you work so that you are at all times *methodologically self-conscious*? We will discuss this further in Chapter 4.

So, what does it mean to adopt a *critical design attitude* in a research study? How does the *methodologically self-conscious researcher* behave? Our central concern is that student researchers are asked, not 'Have you done your methodology chapter?' but 'What are the methodological structures and operations of your study?' In this sense research *is* methodology.

The operational definition of methodology which we discuss in this book can be summarised as having the following characteristics and strategies.

> Methodology is ...
>
> 'Methodology' is not something that is reported/accounted/'done with' in one chapter (though a version of it normally is).
>
> 'Methodology' starts on Day One.
>
> 'Methodology' irradiates the whole of the research.
>
> 'Methodology' is as much about choosing a tape-recorder as about rearing Habermas.
>
> 'Methodology' *is* your research diary.
>
> The whole research process is 'methodological', and this is evident in the 'persuasive' study.

Throughout the book we shall keep our operational definition to the forefront of our discussions. In the following section we explore further our definition of *methodology* by looking in particular at the relationship of *research questions* to those which are asked in empirical situations, and which we identify as *field questions*.

Why are research questions important?

It is important to distinguish between research questions – those that originate, shape and are, to some extent, answered by the study – from field questions – those that are actually put to people in whatever form.

We asked 13 PhD students who had successfully framed and refined their research questions to talk about why they felt the formulation of research questions was an important early stage of their research act. All participants readily agreed that research questions were important and went on to explain why they mattered to their own studies. They wrote:

- My questions matter because they set the parameters for my study.
- These questions matter for me because they define the issues pertinent to my research, will help me to clarify the situation and find ways forward.
- My research questions set out the principles that the study is based on.
- These questions matter because it gives my research a clear focus. It is important that the research I do benefits others and not just me, and it is important that I know why I am doing the study.
- For me, it is important to return to such questions during the research process – to remember what I'm doing and why!
- Research should be enjoyable for the researcher, so the research topic is important to me. My particular research questions help me to clarify, and therefore justify, my own work and to work out the reasonings for doing it.
- These particular research questions are important in the clarification and development of the practical aspects of research.
- My research questions help focus attention on the more important aspects of writing up the study.
- They [the research questions] enable me to clarify thoughts about underlying reasons for the study I've chosen to carry out.
- The research questions are important because they are firstly important to me – they help me to be clear about what's important in what I'm doing.

- They are important in helping me to develop good research practice.
- The formulation of these questions has helped me to be clear in my thoughts and they give my research direction.
- Developing my research questions and then sticking closely to them in designing the small-scale study has kept my study going in the right direction.

Activity 2.6

Whether you have decided on your own research questions or whether you are still deciding on the precise form of words, look over the comments made by research students above and note down the responses which fit, in some way, your own feelings about your research questions.

Note the key words and phrases that occur in several different responses. Ask yourself, whether it is appropriate for you to include such terms in your own discussion of the importance of research questions.

The themes emerging from the responses of our students can be grouped into three categories: defining limits, clarification and empirical issues.

Research questions require researchers to:

- **define the limits of their study**
- **clarify their research study**
- **identify empirical issues and work on empirical questions.**

Generating and justifying research questions

In our own work we have developed two simple tools that can be employed in the generation of research questions: the 'Russian doll principle' and the 'Goldilocks test'. Applying the 'Russian doll principle' means breaking down the research question from the original statement to something which strips away the complication of layers and obscurities until the very essence – the heart – of the question can be expressed. This may well mean phrasing and rephrasing the question so that each time its focus becomes sharpened and more defined – just as a Russian doll is taken apart to reveal, finally, a tiny doll at the centre.

The generated questions can then be subjected to the 'Goldilocks test' – a metaphor for thinking through the suitability of the research questions for a particular researcher in a particular setting at a particular time. So, we can ask: is this question 'too big', so that it cannot be tackled in this particular study at this time – perhaps it is a study which needs significant research funding or assistance which is not usually available to students doing research for an academic award? We can ask 'Is this too small?' – perhaps there is not enough substance to the question to warrant investigation. We can ask if the question is 'too hot' – perhaps an issue which is so sensitive that the timing is not right for investigation – or such that researching it at this point would be not only difficult but damaging in the particular social context. These questions will enable us finally to identify those questions which might be 'just right' for investigation at *this* time, by *this* researcher in *this* setting.

The following example will illustrate the application of the 'Russian doll principle' and the 'Goldilocks test'.

Case sketch 2.1 Crowsfoot School

Crowsfoot School is a large comprehensive school in the South of England. Over the years several schools for pupils with special educational needs in the region have attempted to transfer pupils with learning difficulties into the school. Inclusion has worked for some pupils but not for all. Following the failure, recently, to include three pupils in succession, the head teacher asked for a review of the situation. She wanted to know what was working against the inclusion of pupils and if there was anything which could be done to improve the inclusion success rate at the school.

The researcher visits the school to discuss the research study she has been commissioned to do. The head teacher provided details of pupils whom the school has attempted to include in the past three years, and contact details for three 'feeder' special schools. The researcher was given a tour of the school, met the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and had coffee in the staffroom at break time where she was introduced to staff. Staffroom 'chat' indicated that there were a number of issues about which some staff are unhappy – there is no whole-staff consensus or commitment to the 'inclusion' policy.

What research questions would guide such a study? Below are several alternatives, generated by students in a research questions workshop in response to the 'Crowsfoot' scenario.

Draft research questions for the Crowsfoot study

1 What is going wrong with attempts at inclusion at Crowsfoot School?
2 Which teachers can successfully include pupils with learning difficulties at Crowsfoot School?
3 Is the inclusion policy at Crowsfoot School working?
4 Why are some staff against inclusion at Crowsfoot School?

5 What can be done to implement the inclusion policy at Crowsfoot School?
6 What staff attitudes prevent inclusion at Crowsfoot?
7 What do staff do when they successfully include pupils with learning difficulties at Crowsfoot School?

One way of refining research questions and applying the Goldilocks test and the Russian doll principle is to write the questions in order and, next to each question, decide on its 'Goldilocks' status and draw out any factors which will help you to refine the questions. Table 2.1 shows what our students did with the Crowsfoot questions.

Activity 2.7

Apply the 'Goldilocks test' to research questions:

- Are any of the above questions too large, too small, too 'hot' ... ?

This process suggests that question 6, 'What staff attitudes prevent inclusion at Crowsfoot?', and question 7, 'What do staff do when they successfully include pupils with learning difficulties at Crowsfoot School?', are the most appropriate beginnings for the study. Other questions (such as questions 2 and 4) indicate that the attitudes and practices of staff are key to providing responses to the head teacher's concerns about inclusion.

Finally, after thinking about the 'Russian doll principle' and the 'Goldilocks test' the students agreed on two questions for this study, designed to refine the focus of the research and to enable to effective generation of future empirical questions:

- To what extent do the attitudes of staff affect the inclusion of children with learning difficulties in Crowsfoot School?
- What steps might be taken to develop more inclusive attitudes and practices at Crowsfoot?

We shall return to the Crowsfoot case sketch later (in Chapter 5) when we consider the relationship of research questions to the literature review.

Activity 2.8

Table 2.1 offers a strategy which you might use to support the development of your own research questions. When you are ready to do so, we suggest that you create a blank version of Table 2.2 and use it to generate and refine your own research questions.

Table 2.1 Developing research questions for the Crowsfoot scenario

No.	Draft research question	Goldilocks test	Russian doll principle
1	What's going wrong with attempts at inclusion at Crowsfoot School?	Too big	This question requires several smaller questions before a study could be designed around it
2	Which teachers can successfully include pupils with learning difficulties at Crowsfoot School?	Too hot	Naming successful teachers is not a desirable outcome. But the attitudes and practices of successful teachers might be useful
3	Is the inclusion policy at Crowsfoot School working?	Too big	This question requires several smaller questions before a study could be designed around it
4	Why are some staff against inclusion at Crowsfoot School?	Too big (and perhaps too hot)	This question suggests that there might be a need to investigate staff attitudes
5	What can be done to implement the inclusion policy at Crowsfoot School?	Too big	This question points to the need to identify strategies for action
6	What staff attitudes prevent inclusion at Crowsfoot ?	Just right?	Perhaps this should be more clearly expressed
7	What do staff do when they successfully include pupils with learning difficulties at Crowsfoot School?	Just right?	This question will help to identify successful inclusion practices

In a different study, Karen, working on her MA dissertation, used the ideas in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 to work out her research questions for a study of a young child's capacity for social interaction with children and adults. In Table 2.3 we can see Karen's refinement of her research questions. Satisfied with a working research question Karen went on to use the same framework to think about the field questions she wanted to ask. We shall return to this in Chapter 6.

What we have tried to emphasise in this chapter is the pervasive nature of methodology and the importance of framing questions which inform the creation of research methods. We shall return to these themes later.

Table 2.2 Framework for refining research questions

No.	Draft research question	Goldilocks test	Russian doll principle
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

The methodology of any study is unlikely to be complete until the research is arrested for the purposes of report; a methodology worthy of the name will be continuously and reflexively developed as the study proceeds – in much the same way as the data which emerge from methods reflect back on and qualify the suitability of those methods for the purpose in hand.

Endnote

Narrowly understood, a research methodology is sometimes seen as standing slightly outside of the main achievement of a study, a sort of guarantee – in the common sense of the term – whose small print may be technically necessary but hardly essential reading for the operation of the product! What we argue here, however, is a broader view of methodology as the very seat of justification of any claims which

might follow. Methods mediate between research questions and the answers which data partially provide to them; methodology justifies and guarantees that process of mediation. In the end, the characteristic task for a methodology is to persuade the reader of the *unavoidably* triangular connection between *these* research questions, *these* methods used to operationalise them and *these* data so generated.

Table 2.3 Using Goldilocks and Russian Dolls to refine a research question on babies' social interaction

No.	Draft research questions	Goldilocks test	Russian doll principle
1	Have advances in childcare changed the social interaction patterns of babies and young children in recent years, or do they still have a largely egocentric perspective towards the environment, adults, and their peers?	Too big	This statement is too long for a research question. It needs to be short, accurate, informative and interesting
2	Can babies and young children socially interact with adults and peers in the childcare environment?	Too big	Too vague and generalised. Need to clarify exactly what I hope to see, and specify the age range of the children
3	Can children socially interact with peers and adults in the childcare environment?	Too big	Too vague and generalised. I have also limited my choices by removing the word 'babies.' What is it that I specifically want to know?
4	Have the social interaction patterns of babies and young children changed in recent years or are they still largely egocentric?	Too big	Although I have been more specific relating to what I want to study, i.e. whether the social interaction patterns of babies and young children have changed in recent years, this topic is still too big. I need to be more specific and scale down the research question to ensure it is more achievable
5	Can a child under 2 years old socially interact with other children and adults?	Just right?	I have stated what I want to study, i.e. social/emotional development, and been more specific about the age range. By focusing on one child the study will be manageable

Activity 2.9

Before you leave this chapter, think about your own research study. Ask yourself:
Why are you doing this study in this way?
Can you justify the research decisions you have made?
Make some notes about the justification of your research design in your research journal.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we have:

provided an overview of what we mean by methodology

discussed the distinction between 'methods' and 'methodology'

discussed, with examples, the function of methodological consideration in the context of your research study

discussed the function and importance of research questions

provided a structure within which you might generate and justify your research questions

encouraged you to express, in writing, your own positions on the key elements of the chapter in relation to your research questions and methodology.

FURTHER READING

de Vaus, D. (2001) *Research Design in Social Research*. London: Sage.

For a succinct summary of the importance of clarifying research questions and their operational and conceptual definitions read 'Tools for research design' (Chapter 2). This chapter focuses on the clarification of research questions and concepts at the outset of a study.