AND NOW FOR YOUR OWN RESEARCH DESIGN . . .

Take from this example the general ideas about how to go about thinking through your own plan for 'finding out'.

Your plan may look very different but follow the guidelines in Chapter 2, start with your Real Questions (as discussed in Chapter 3) and consider the practicalities talked about in Chapter 4 and the other resources described in Chapter 6. Now choose carefully from the techniques outlined in the rest of this chapter and feel free to invent more or extemporise!

PART B—TECHNIQUES FOR 'FINDING OUT'

INTRODUCTION—SOME GENERAL METHODS

In this book 'techniques' and 'methods' are roughly equivalent terms referring to specific concrete ways of seeking data or information about a situation or people's lives, experiences or activities. The term 'methodology' refers to your larger framework of underlying philosophical assumptions about the nature of the social world (or worlds!) you are researching. For example, if you think there is one world or one reality—or if you think there are multiple 'worlds' or 'realities'—these are your different methodological (or epistemological) assumptions and they affect your choice of techniques or methods. (Chapter 2 of this book explored some of its own methodology. See also Appendix B: 'methodology', 'science/social science', 'research', and 'social research'.) Mostly we do this rather intuitively and even if we are not conscious of what are our own methodologies of choice. We only run into trouble if they conflict with those of the people we are researching or researching for!

Somewhere in between **methodologies** (such as 'logical positivism' or 'critical constructivism'*) and **techniques** (such as questionnaires and focus groups) are some **general methods** or approaches that may cover an amalgam of techniques.

You will have heard terms like 'survey', 'evaluation', 'action research' and 'community study'. These are terms describing *general* research approaches—and each of these may in turn involve one or more specific techniques such as interviewing, observations, discussions, case studies or a questionnaire. Although these more general methods are listed later as 'techniques', they are more like general research plans or designs in themselves (although you may have a design which has different 'moments', each of which looks more like one of these than another).

A **survey**, as the commonsense understanding of the word suggests, involves an overview—much as the sense of the word in 'land survey' involves the idea of inspecting or investigating from some vantage point an entire terrain. Mostly, a survey is presumed to involve a questionnaire, but this is not necessarily so. It does, however, presume an idea about checking out an overall, general or entire 'terrain' or population or social situation. If this is impractical, then sampling will be necessary.

Evaluation involves ascribing 'value', 'merit', 'worth' or 'significance', or ascertaining the degree to which such and such a social arrangement is achieving its goals (goals which have been previously ascribed value, merit, etc.). In some ways *all* research involves evaluation even if only implicitly, in that all research chooses to look at some things and not others, chooses to do so using some techniques and not others, and chooses among competing theories

* Don't panic about the big words! As we said, people have been arguing about these matters for thousands of years! Just be clear and honest about why you prefer to research in the way you choose in response to any who question you.

to explain findings—and all these choices are guided or driven by values. Evaluative research makes these values explicit.

Just as in some sense all research is really evaluation, so also can it be said that all research is **action research**—however, again, the term is generally used for research that recognises explicitly its action component. That is, change is understood as inevitably resulting from the research process, and this is recognised and consciously built in to the basic design so that we change, act, observe, reflect, change . . .

Similarly, **participatory action research** recognises explicitly that in some sense *all* research also involves the participation of people who are more or less consciously party to the inquiry effort—researchers, researched and various groups of 're-searched for'—and that this participation can be incorporated consciously for the purposes of enhancing the inquiry's effectiveness. The connection between participation and action—particularly the dynamic social or intersubjective construction of reality (and realities)—is also utilised rather than suppressed, denied or ignored.

A **community study** is generally a kind of preliminary research which seeks to 'find out' about the nature of a particular social network—ultimately in order to solve some other 'problem' (in the sense of answering a question posed). It is commonly thought of as a study of a local geographic area-based network, but can also refer to a 'community of interest', such as an occupational, ethnic, age or religious grouping.

It is worth mentioning that many of the best 'community' studies find that 'community' doesn't exist (or is having a hard time maintaining itself)—in the sense of people knowing and being known by each other in order to mutually maintain the conditions for life. It is upwards of a century since 'community' has existed in its original sense of an interdependent and economic survival-oriented social unit (with the partial exceptions of some rural areas).

Another term referring to a general process, which may be used by all of these general research approaches, is **sampling**. For convenience it has also been included as a 'technique', which it is, but not in the same sense as an interview is a technique. Sampling ensures that the **results** of techniques such as interviews, questionnaires, etc., will be useful as valid representations of the thoughts and actions of the general 'populations' being studied (whenever it is not practical to study the entire 'population').

Finally, when choosing from the following shopping list of techniques, you should take into account the previous discussion of guidelines and the questions you are trying to answer, and ask these questions:

- Which techniques seem most appropriate to our purposes?
- Which ones have we the time, money and skills to use?
- Are there going to be any unintended consequences of us using any particular technique? (For example, using a questionnaire does not easily include people in a social process of discussion and reflection—especially by all those filling them in. Using discussion groups may not give a picture of how a very large number of people might see a situation.)
- Will the technique we choose generate too much

information? Or of the wrong kind, for example, too much information that has to be kept secret?

TECHNIQUE A: GOAL-SETTING PROCEDURES

There are at least two reasons for using goal-setting procedures—firstly to establish the purposes of the research effort; and secondly as a data-producing method for 'finding out' (for example, what the goals or aspirations of an organisation or program are, or what consumers' experiences of a service have been). The first is necessary to the planning of the research process. The second is necessary to inform the planning process of the social group that may be under self-study.

The technique is much the same for both, and basically involves a structured group discussion or effort to assist the following processes:

- The working out of the questions in people's minds by identifying the 'for whom' and 'for what' of the research (program or organisation). That is, to work out what is the target area or issue, what needs to be 'fixed', and what are the best actions to fix it.

  It tries to do this in such a way as to leave the project with 'achievable' (in the sense of manageable) goals which are limited and realistic given the group's time and energies. 'Operationalisation' of objectives is when they are turned into smaller, more detailed actions that are aimed to achieve the overall goal or goals.
- The arrangement of these in order of priority (if there are too many to attend to equally and immediately).

  It requires the full participation of all involved to achieve a consensus of perceptions. If there are insurmountable conflicts within the group, *this* is where they must emerge and be resolved (even if it means returning for several meetings or even dissolving the group or splitting off into two or more efforts). If there are insufficient or no grounds for agreement, there are no grounds for shared action and research. The inquiry group will work best when it is as united in its purposes as possible. There will be plenty of time to expose the process and what it generates to disagreement. But within the group, scepticism and questioning will only contribute positively if there are already strong shared assumptions and friendship (trust and respect) relations. To gloss over difficulties or schisms at the beginning is to 'let the chooks out of the bag', and they will eventually come home to roost. (This is an Australian expression—chooks are chickens—and the meaning is akin to what is popularly meant by 'opening Pandora's box'!)

Now there are all manner of sophisticated techniques to do this—there are systems called 'nominal group process',* 'the Delphi technique',* simple ranking,* Optional Proportional Representation,* focus groups* and old-fashioned brainstorming*—most of which attempt to involve more than one or two people in the process on the assumption that the more people's thinking you direct to an issue, the more people's thoughts you'll end up with, and the more the chance for creativity and strong agreement. It should be noted that these methods can be used at any time throughout the research process (for example, for generating theory).

Common problems to be addressed include:

- Having a range of great ideas, but not being able to get real consensus—one or two may be dominating the group's discussion, people may not feel they can speak frankly, there's no method for getting agreement or ordering priorities, there are persistent real differences that participants or the facilitator are too afraid to speak about. (The latter is the 'white horse on the dinner table' syndrome. Everyone keeps eating and making polite conversation but the glaring topic—there's a white horse standing on the table towering over everyone's heads—is carefully and skilfully avoided.)
- Having lots of consensus but around weak ideas (the 'Abaleen syndrome'—someone says let's go for a drive, no-one has much of an idea where to drive to, someone suggests Abaleen, everyone agrees for want of a better suggestion, everyone ends up in Abaleen, no-one particularly wants to be there).

Good ways of overcoming these problems are:

- If the group is larger than six people, split into small groups of three to five people and get each to address the question or questions at hand (for example, 'What do we think are the three most important needs of Ballywallop youth?', or 'Who are we doing our research for and why?', or 'What would be five good solutions to the problems we've listed?'). It's very easy to lose or inhibit someone's contribution once there are more than five people either trying to have a say or too afraid to speak.
- If there are strongly differing, competing, opposing or repressed viewpoints, particularly if combined with power imbalances (for example,

* See Appendix B for explanations of these methods.

where social workers and clients are discussing service provision, or there are managers and line subordinates) it may even be necessary and useful to split into homogeneous subgroups to get the stories straight and out before returning to the full group.

- Write the answers down—put them up on the wall, or circulate copies for everyone to see (anonymously or aggregated if necessary)—then repeat the questions.
- Once there is a good range of ideas, get people to discuss them, then rank them, vote on them, and so on, until everyone gets an idea of what seems most important to people.
- Give people a chance to explain and argue for their ideas—now is the time to admit the maximum amount of existing 'data' or evidence. Do not move to decision-making where there is still uncertainty or anxiety or an absence of clearly desirable options. This only stores up trouble for later.
- Encourage creativity, and innovation. Have a few outrageous ideas. Laugh a bit. Enjoy the process! Assure everyone that their barrows will all get a chance to be pushed. (And make sure all representative barrow pushers are there—*if* it is important not to miss out on a viewpoint.)
- Face to face meetings are often the best and most direct method—but written efforts may be useful additions. However, check carefully that those-who-come-to-the-meeting are all (or representative of) those you want to be involved. Are there house-bound people missing out on having a say? People without child-care? People working nightshifts? People on holiday, or just too shy to come to a meeting? Are you having the meeting in a psychiatric hospital and expecting ex-patients to attend? Are there people absent that others dislike or feel uncomfortable about but who should be involved in the process regardless? You may need to go to them to get their input and interest rather than have them come to you.

A final word about levels of goals. Some people distinguish between mission or goals, aims and objectives. It's really up to you what you define as what, but common definitions might be:

Long-term or broad goal (or mission)
A long-range, positive statement describing the general state of affairs desired (the sort you get in the constitution of an organisation).

Shorter term objective/s
A statement of how the 'big picture' will be achieved, or how the abstract goals translate into practical action.

Specific immediate aims
These are framed to achieve specific outcomes which are designed to achieve your aims and goals. They are identifiable, obtainable, concrete, time limited, and operational (can be put into practice, and the practice checked to see if it took place).

Here's an example:

Long-term or broad goal or mission
We envisage a society in which children are cared for by both their mothers and fathers. (Current problem: too few men sharing the care with the women.)

Short-term objectives
a To involve men we know in child-care of our own children.
b To research what others have done.
c To write an article about this.
d To involve men in a follow-up study.

Specific immediate aims
a To get Pip's husband to look after Emma one night a week; Nora's boyfriend to take Justin off her hands one day a week; and Jane's ex-husband to want a shared custody arrangement.
b To read books and discuss them at our monthly meetings as research for our article.
c To write an article for the local paper about men's relationships with children.
d To each invite one man to a meeting for a taped discussion.

TECHNIQUE B: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

An individual interview is simply a face to face meeting in which two people have a conversation. It is, however, a particular kind of conversation—one in which one person is setting out to get answers to particular questions, to hear the other person's views and ideas, and about that person's position and life.

Yet it is never just one-way. Not only might the 'other' person also ask questions, but it is certainly *always* a reciprocal interaction in terms of the interviewer inevitably communicating some of her or his own self: via appearance, dress, age, sex, tone of voice, time and place of interview, eye-contact, nature of response (giving away attitudes, expectations, perceptions and motives), body language and so on.

This reciprocity not only can't be avoided but is actually necessary to any human interaction. It should, however, be consciously thought about. That is, bias is inevitable. There's no such thing as neutral dress, age, sex and so on, although these may be chosen to fit in with or reflect a particular kind of image or bias. The interviewer needs to consciously assess the impact of these and plan to ensure that they assist the interviewing process, and not hinder its objectives of getting accurate, extensive and reliable responses. If you are happy to make changes to your image and approach, do so—but if you are a woman interviewing male prisoners, or a 35-year-old interviewing an unemployed youth, you must be aware of the impact on the response you might get.*

But there is far more to it than this. Reciprocity also includes shared values and purposes and the communication of these goes way beyond dress and manners. Sharing of self is not just a superficial, manipulative, means-to-ends device to set someone at ease. As with most conversation, you are trying to build a relationship of trust, where the other person feels free to speak. Fundamentally, the person being questioned is more or less actively processing you—not just by appearance, but by a myriad of other important clues—to try to find out where you stand in relation to her or his own life world. This is a step to assessing whether this research is in her or his own interests or not, or will be harmful, actively harmful, pointless or worthwhile. If you are judged to be too much at odds, too distant or not able to understand or respect, you may not be told things that someone who is judged as 'more like us' or 'not a threat' or 'will be fair' may be told.

You may need to employ co-researchers who are closer to those being questioned instead of yourself, or pay some of 'the researched'—who may be (or become) part of the inquiry group—to carry out this work.

When you or a co-researcher are engaging in conversational or question-based interviews, you are trying to communicate. When you try to do that successfully in everyday life, think of the things you do.

Good questioning

When you ask someone a question you have a pretty clear idea of what you are asking or probing for. The question is simple and comprehensible. You make sure they know what your intention is; it's not a 'leading question'—and if it is, then you're very aware it is and are testing something out (and are prepared to observe either a passive agreeable wrong answer or a sharp riposte). See the section in this chapter on questionnaires for ways of phrasing and putting questions. You try to ask the right questions—right in the sense of being strategic to your purposes and answerable. If they are unclear, note the response (or lack of it) and re-ask with more clarity. This will be terribly important at the early stages of question-asking. Never stick to bad questions for the sake of saving face! A 'pilot' is an official time when greater success may well be measured by more changes and adjustments rather than less. That is, try to clarify your questions *before* you put them to every one of 400 people! (That's a lot of people to have to go back to after you reword the question significantly with person 296—or person 18!)

Ask the most strategically powerful questions for your purposes. Much research gets no further than questions about how things are now. Fran Peavey (1994) has pointed out the even greater strategic value of asking questions about how people *feel* about how things are now, and what people might like instead, and what would need to happen for desires to be implemented, and so on.

One other point is, if asking the same questions of a number of people, *be consistent:* ask the same question in more or less the same way. Only if the questions asked were comparable will you later be in a position to compare answers.

Good listening

You get absorbed in what the person is saying. You concentrate intensely. You are not neutral—but you mentally note your own response and leave it to one side for the time being. You are empathetic, encouraging, agreeable (in the sense of not projecting a stony face), you nod or go 'mm' and 'uh ha' to *show* you are listening. Think about what you do, and what others you know who are Good Listeners do when listening. Listen, for example, to some public broadcasting (in Australia, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) or other good radio or television interviewers—perhaps to some science or oral history interviews. Note the interviewer's style, their inflection and their capacities to get information. They are often comfortable with pauses or even outright silences.

Compare them with some commercial interviewers

* Video or telephone interviewing is very similar but the latter lacks all the visual cues. For straightforward questioning, phone interviews can be less expensive, less time-consuming and can have quite high response rates. They do, however, rely on interviewees having a phone, being home to answer it, or not having it on an answering machine all the time!—and this may introduce various kinds of bias.

who clearly appear to have pre-formed ideas on certain subjects or are 'moving right along now' so quickly they almost fill in the person's answers for them. Assess their capacities, note the information they get and don't get. Decide what approaches you think you could use effectively. Remember that if you are asking really strategic and valuable questions the person may not have thought about them before. Encourage, and feel comfortable yourself with quietly waiting. You might say 'no rush' or 'take your time with that one'. You might even design a process that lets you come back to the question again later. You wouldn't want *your* first answer set in stone as your last word—neither do most people. From this point of view, what static one-off questionnaire surveys often collect and measure are people's unthought-through answers. While these may be important data in and of themselves, they also may have far less value for your purposes than well thought-through answers, and even ones where people have had a chance also to review other people's thinking about them.

Good hearing

You try to Hear. You actually 'take in' what you're listening to. You don't jump ahead thinking 'I know what she or he means'. You wait, and ponder it. Are you sure they mightn't have meant something else? Are you sure you understand what they meant when they used that word or phrase?

You are able to 'hear' the unexpected answer. It pulls you up and you think 'Oh, I had that wrong'. And you 'hear' if the answer is unsure, confused, not really relevant, or seems to be just saying what might be expected, or safe or commonplace or otherwise restrained or imposed . . . and you check it out. An interview, while it must be systematic and consistent, must also be flexible, probing and continually checking meanings ('Do you mean . . .?', 'I'm not sure I followed that . . .', 'Can you explain that some more . . .?').

Good notes

Finally, it is not commonplace in everyday conversation to *record* such conversation, but in a research conversation—in an interview—it is *essential* to be able to refer accurately to the contents in order to draw on the 'data', the evidence on which a conclusion is based or an observation made.

Now, interviews can range from very unplanned (you just run into someone at the supermarket and have a chat) through to very planned (often called 'structured' in the textbooks)—such as where you have a written list of specific questions and have arranged a special appointment time with a particular person. The recording also can reflect these different degrees of formality—and be notes written on recall (when you get back to the supermarket carpark and find a pencil to write them on the paper carry bag!), or be full-scale tape recordings and written word-for-word transcripts. The notebook (or clipboard) and pen are not the stock-in-trade images of the social researcher for nothing!

For your purposes, recall will be an unreliable method (this needs a lot of practice and skill), and tape recording can be a time-consuming and elaborate technique. Tape recordings quite often go wrong, sometimes put people off or constrain the talk—particularly if the topic is highly sensitive (although they have the ethical virtue of making it clear that what the person is saying may 'go on the record')—are difficult in interviews of more than one person unless you know and can identify all the voices, and most of all they yield *huge* amounts of information and require huge amounts of work. Remember, one hour of interviewing yields one hour of listening, three to five hours typing transcription, 20 pages of paper and any number of hours of analysis; multiply that by a sample of 50, consider how you're going to feed it back to people, and . . .!! Taping and transcribing needs resources: money for high-quality conference tape recorders and tapes and a dictaphone and/or money to pay people for typed transcription and photocopying of the often thick manuscript which results, as well as more paid time for any editing or preliminary analysis.

Tape recording *can* on the other hand be useful, for example, if used as a basis for later note-taking, as a feedback mechanism, say to demonstrate

particular voices dominating discussion, or to show how formal meetings' procedures exclude creative exploration of ideas or the contribution of (especially) women in a non-adversarial atmosphere. They can also be spectacularly valuable as suppliers of detailed data for intensive analysis and re-analysis by either the speakers themselves or other audiences. Conversations may be analysed for a myriad of purposes (for example, the existence or direction of friendship, power and authority, or decision-making relations; the influence of gender or professional status; themes and topics; how often certain matters get cited; and so on). They magnify the capacity for reflection in a sometimes quite remarkable way (for example, where practice has become so automatic, rushed or taken-for-granted that rationales and patterns are no longer as people think they are, but people have no way of stopping and looking at their practice).

Mostly you may be best off learning to take notes about the key points a person is making and taking direct quotes when they seem important. (You can quite easily say, 'Hold on, that was interesting. Can I get that down exactly?', and take a few moments to write it down.)

Now obviously, you must already have some idea of what counts as 'important', and this is where your preliminary research—early conversations, not necessarily carefully recorded; as well as goal-setting meetings, and meetings where you've decided what questions to ask and what are likely answers—is so important. You will be able to mentally slot answers in to some prepared categories. (You may even be able to have a multiple-choice questionnaire-type page—see Technique E in this chapter—in front of you on which to record answers.) You will also know when answers don't confirm your expectations.

There are at least two main ways of recording answers. You could record running responses (of any

length) under headings 'Question 1', 'Question 2', etc. You name or number all the pages with the interviewee's name or code number, and shuffle them into piles or whatever to do the analysis. The major benefit of this approach is where you are collecting more story-like experiences of indeterminable length, or where your inquiry is very new and you cannot judge either an appropriate or desirable average length of response.

Or, you can have pre-prepared sheets with spaces on them in which to fill in the answers (like using a questionnaire for an interview). This helps control the amount of data you collect (when the space is full, go on to the next question!), but you can have some messy sheets (or lots of scraps) when the respondent goes on at length with an incredibly interesting idea or answer that goes beyond the neat little space provided (or space available on the back!).

Whichever method you use to record people's answers, make sure:

- You get some kind of answer to every question (be systematic). Sometimes it just doesn't feel 'right' to ask a question when you get in to the situation. But when you get back to the office you wonder why on earth you didn't—because now you don't know what they would have said (and you now have an incomplete data set).
- Often you have to gather courage to ask your questions. Asking questions is difficult in our culture. It may be seen as impolite, something only children or ignorant people need to do, or even rude or intrusive. It helps to be able to say 'This is research': the research role is one of the few adult respected roles in which one may appear naive and unknowledgeable and which also gives a lot of licence to enter into people's lives and find out things no-one else would have easy access to. Never abuse this privilege. Always submit your research—especially individual interviews—to the informed scrutiny of the 'researched'. Fortunately, more and more people are feeling confident enough to ask questions and politely refuse research even if it is someone in a white coat from a university reassuring them they can 'Have trust, we are scientists'.
- When it's a direct quote (and only when it's a direct quote) use quote marks ('This is a direct quote') so you can use it later in the write-up (be rigorous). Also in the interests of rigor, if you add your own words (of explication, explanation, theory, etc.) or notes (for example, on how there was a long pause before answering a particular question; or the person gave visual clues) do it in capital letters or put it in square brackets to show that it is *you* speaking, not the interviewee. You can use square brackets round your questioning, too. It is useful to record your exact form of questioning, when using a more conversational style of interview, so you can see more closely the relationship between this and the answer you got.
- After the interview, read the notes through to make sure they make sense and nothing important has been missed. Do this on the same day or the next day. Don't leave it till a month or even a week later—you'll have lost touch with it.

P.S. Interviewing is exhausting—your attention is needed throughout. You're hard at work communicating the whole time—so don't try more than three half-hour interviews in a row. If they're an hour long, two or three will be plenty for one day.

TECHNIQUE C: GROUP INTERVIEWS

Read the preceding section on individual interviews: everything applies similarly in group interviewing, but group interviewing places some additional special demands on the interviewer. Following are some useful techniques:

- If at all possible, limit the group to less than ten people. You are partly relying on intra (within) group interaction for your results—and the more people, the less time there is for each person to speak. As well, the larger the group, the more the group will try to organise itself—generating chosen or self-chosen spokespeople, leaders and followers, the knowledgeable and the listeners! It is also harder to generate and sustain trust when the group size is too great (or too small).
- The fewer and the simpler the questions the better. In a group, everything multiplies—three questions and ten people is potentially a very large number of different answers (and potentially different combinations of different answers)!
- You can use the group as a quasi-survey or for a straw poll—asking closed or open questions and systematically getting every single person's responses (or even a show of hands in a very big group), but remember the group effect. On the one hand everyone will quickly see what everyone else thinks but, on the other hand, as you get round the group the answers the earlier people gave may modify the responses of the later people, and so on. This effect may escalate if the topic is sensitive.
- Or you can use the group more as a focus group (see the definition in Appendix B), where it is the interaction *between* people which generates a range of responses to only one or two key focus questions, and you may not hear equally from everyone.
- Groups are, in this way, most exciting when you are utilising the group dynamics to generate new ideas, collect a wide range of perceptions, or find innovative solutions to persistent problems. For example, sometimes in a quasi-survey, by the time you are halfway round with one question the later people are racking their imaginations for new

answers to give, rather than be repetitive! There is also a 'billiard table effect' whereby someone tosses in one idea; it ricochets around the group raising several other ideas in quick succession; one of those ideas combines with another person's idea to remind someone of something else they'd never thought of linking to the original issue at hand—and a remarkable new service solution is suddenly given birth in the midst of it.

- Recording your notes is much more difficult. If you know all the people, or can somehow identify each person, do so in your notes so you can see who's saying what and compare their overall answers and positions. Draw a picture of the table with each person's name where they are sitting.
- It may be best to tape record and then write notes from the tape at your leisure later. But again, schedule the note-taking task soon after or you will lose your sharp memory (which may be needed to supplement poor taping or confusion regarding the voices).
- Be clear in your own mind what you want out of the meeting—whether you want overall dominant ideas or themes, generalisations about the percentage of people thinking such and such, evidence of how the group works as a team, to document a range of ideas, or to throw up new ideas and operate as a creative forum. It will affect how and what you record.
- Don't be afraid to stop the talk and ask, 'How many think this idea?', or 'Is this an important issue in this organisation?', or 'What other things can we think of as solutions to that problem?'
- Use a blackboard or butcher's paper to clarify or feedback ideas.
- The biggest risks are group domination and the loss of input from quieter people. Watch for this, and say, for example to a quieter person, making eye contact at the same time, 'What were you thinking about this one . . .?' (And be sure to pause and wait, even if they initially say, 'Oh no, I haven't really got anything to say'.) Or, to move from a person who has had a good say, 'Can anyone offer another view?' See Technique A: Goal-setting meetings for ideas.
- Keep track of your questions—make sure they have been covered adequately. Keep the discussion flowing. Mentally monitor what you've covered and what you yet have to cover so that discussion doesn't go too far or for too long off the point. There is a much greater threat of this in a group than in an individual interview.
- If it is a very important 'one-off' or large meeting, or one where you know it may be difficult to slow it down, or one where there may be lots of conflict and rapid discussion, you may want to resort to conference tape recording if you can borrow the equipment. Remember, it will be difficult to identify voices, so try to take your own key notes. Still use it as an adjunct—and try to use fairly sophisticated technology (radio or directional microphones are more successful than a standard cassette recorder with a condenser). There's nothing worse than two hours of distorted and noisy taping of an absolutely crucial discussion! Don't forget to test it after the first ten seconds or so! It's fine to stop the discussion after the first few sentences, or after each person has said their name, and rewind and listen to check it is recording *and* picking up each voice OK. You just need a little confidence to do this. It does not mean you are incompetent—actually the reverse.

One of the most useful aspects of group interviewing—besides allowing you to get more meaningful understandings by being able to check them on the spot—is that it is a very open and a very creative method. By the end of the meeting, the whole group has been able to take part in a collective information-gathering process because it's not just you who has found out what they have had to say—they all have!

Often, the group interview can cut through a number of research steps, especially if the group is the inquiry group or comprises members of the critical reference group. As a group they can reflect on the results there and then, and even work on what the implications are for future action.

Further formal analysis or data presentation may not be necessary—it can have happened in the course of the group meeting. The problem may even have been solved. This is the point where formal 'big R' Research tapers off into informal 'small r' everyday or action research. The group interview or discussion can be a *very* useful tool.

TECHNIQUE D: DIALOGUE AND STORY-TELLING

A variation on the group interview or group discussion is where individuals or the group as a whole give longer, more story-like (narrative) answers to a question or questions, or describe their thoughts or memories around or in response to a topic. In this case, taping and transcribing may be the only way to capture such stories and do them justice. (As well, it may be appropriate for the teller to have even more editorial control over re-writing.)

When people begin telling their stories or giving longer accounts to each other, there can be even more of a 'de-centring' or taking attention away from the nominal researcher or research facilitator. If the dialogue takes place entirely between participants, the facilitator's voice can become almost silent until the moment for turning to reflective questioning ('What do we think about this story?', 'What themes come through for each of us from this?', etc.).

If there are subgroups (perhaps with very different or even discounted or conflicting accounts or experiences), the telling of the stories and accounts may be between the subgroups. Where power or other restraining differences mean one or more subgroups feel unable to speak out in a mixed (heterogeneous) group, the facilitator may need to organise homogeneous subgroups to collect people's accounts of their 'claims, concerns and issues'—to use Guba and Lincoln's classic formulation (1989). The subgroups may possibly never ever meet face to face (and instead may communicate on the basis of reading and responding to typed and read transcripts or edited transcripts). Other times, they may meet separately initially, and then come together for more direct dialogue once the separate views have been collected and circulated.

Alternatively, the facilitator or group members report on the different views and the group takes it from there.

The dialogue area—like story-telling—is fast becoming almost a professional subdiscipline in its own right; much as quantitative researchers who focus on the use of questionnaires and surveys have come to form a distinct speciality. There are all sorts of understandings being accrued as to how to enhance speaking which is truly dialogic (rather than adversarial, argumentative, or discussion aiming at consensus). Dialogue in this sense is hoped to be an exchange of experiences or ideas or views in order that each participant simply gets to hear about those of the Other and also gets to speak about her or his own experiences or ideas or views—including response to what else has been heard, but without personalising the exchange. To enhance this, in some dialogue groups special techniques are used such as avoiding eye-contact, not commenting on each other's words, and continuing for a minimum of two or three hours.

TECHNIQUE E: QUESTIONNAIRES

A questionnaire is a set of questions written down and generally answered in writing on the same sheet of paper. It can be posted or handed to people for them to fill out themselves. Sometimes questionnaires are administered by phone, but this really comes into the category of an interview minus the visual clues. When used as a basis for an interview they are generally called 'interview schedules'.

A questionnaire is a quite formal mechanism and means the research is carried out rather by remote control. That is, short of follow-up questionnaires (and follow-up, follow-up questionnaires!), you can't check out the meanings of responses, refine them, or get access to supplementary information such as 'How did the person feel when she or he wrote this?', 'Did they mean this or this?', 'Did they really mean that?', or even, 'Why didn't they answer that question?' As well, questionnaires dramatically collapse the amount of information supplied to, perhaps, one written line or even a tick in a box.

Although a questionnaire is seen as the most common technique of research, it actually needs a surprisingly high degree of skill to administer:

- For a start it only allows questions to be asked that *we* have already decided are important.

  They'll get answers—no doubt about that—and the answers will be neat, and quantifiable, but we may have serious questions about their usefulness. For example, do our questionnaires 'get at' what people are really on about? Are they really relevant? Do they tell us enough about the complexity of human life? and do people give the most useful answers under these conditions?

  Our experience suggests that they frequently miss out on what people really mean. People may tick the 'YES' box for the question 'Do you need a day-care centre?', but perhaps they mean they *might* need a day-care centre if Frank gets a second job. Or, what they think you mean by 'day-care centre' is a place for Grandma like they had at home in Malta.
- Secondly, our experience tells us that questionnaires frequently are highly irrelevant to people's real worlds—we might be busy asking about child-care needs when the parent we're talking to is overwhelmed by a dissolving marriage. Or we might be asking questions about job satisfaction and the person who gets our questionnaire in the post has been retrenched for more than two years. Or we might be asking about consumer views of a new statewide policy about consumer participation—but the particular consumer we are questioning is continuing to have their own personal complaint against a service systematically disregarded.
- Thirdly, questionnaires narrow and reduce the complexity in people's lives into a set of manageable questions and categories which—while simplifying and perhaps revealing themes—may seriously distort the very things we are trying to understand.

  'Do you have any information needs?—Yes

or No' may still leave us entirely in the dark about what kinds of information needs, when, and under what circumstances, where and by whom these information needs are experienced and, indeed, how 'information' is being interpreted.

Even 'open-ended questions' can barely touch the surface of many complex subjects such as migrant language difficulties, conflict in the home or workplace, attitudes to personal health or any of a stack of other subjects you might want to research.

- There can be a world of difference between what people say and what they do, what they really mean or intend, and what is the case in practice. Apart from straight out non-truth telling (for lots of reasons—most of them highly understandable and valuable data in their own right), people may not have the information they need to answer accurately. They may say one thing today with the baby screaming to be fed, and another thing tomorrow, or they may have no reason not to believe that they would actually do what they say they'd do under XYZ set of circumstances.
- Questionnaires also can easily generate immense amounts of information.
- And, finally, the politics of their use are such that they do not encourage people to meet, discuss, argue, respect differences or resolve conflict. They are very individualistic and static; they give a snapshot picture. They are also very easy to manipulate.

Now all this isn't to say they have no use at all except to those wearing full protective uniform. For simple fact gathering they can be cheap and effective. (Although even so-called 'facts' are slippery little deceitful characters! Simple facts like marital status and even nationality can be subject to numerous different interpretations, much less other facts like whether a human service is doing a good job or has had an effect on people's life situations, or whatever.)

So, how can they be useful at all to the uninitiated? They can still be helpful if used cautiously when:

- you have only a very few (say between three and ten) questions. (Unless they are each just addressing a tiny straightforward empirical matter—like 86 questions asking whether there are signs of cracking and decay in every room of a house, and every wall and door in every room, etc.; or whether you read any of a list of 20 different magazines. However, asking what you think of each of 20 magazines is *not* such a quick and easy matter);
- the questions are so simple that the answers cannot easily be ambiguous, complex, or able to be misunderstood;
- you have already done enough research to know what are the right (and relevant) questions to ask—and perhaps can accurately predict the optional choices for answers;
- you know people are well enough informed to both understand the questions and answer them;
- they aren't intended to give 'delicate' information—that is, the answers don't rely on the respondent trusting the questioner. This applies not just to obvious areas like domestic violence, but even evaluations of services—for example, if the respondent fears she or he might somehow be identified (maybe even by her or his handwriting or turn of phrase);
- you are aware of how they can easily be used against respondents. They are *not* a participatory or democratic method. Respondents need never meet, nor may they have been allowed to give input to either the questions, the analysis or the discussion of the results—much less the decisions that then might be made. Results must be fed back to overcome this.

Given all these pitfalls and warnings, questionnaires *can* generate statistics faster than any other method. It is no coincidence that computers and questionnaires developed at the same time in history, and for many of the same reasons. Remember, they both have the same undemocratic nature—both can be manipulated (even unwittingly) and even by the most well-meaning of people administering them. Ironically, the more centralised the use of questionnaires and the more a small group are the only ones who know the answers generated, the more frustrated they may become when they attempt to simply

instruct people or engineer changes from the top and find no real shift in culture. It is enormously important that people retain the right to know what the research is for and to withdraw their contribution at any time. Even the national Census has to go to increasing lengths to justify itself as people become more and more aware of some of the unsavoury uses made of their responses. But it is even more important if research is to contribute to desired change that even the use of questionnaires involves people's participation at all stages.

An important thing to remember when trying to combat all of this is that the kind of questions you ask are crucial. If you are asking questions which don't help people to critically reflect on their own worlds in which things are problematic to them, and don't generate information which enables people to express their views about these worlds, especially about how to change them, then you are conserving the status quo.

You will be doing what thousands of researchers have done before you—either through malevolent intention, or through a complete lack of reflective understanding about the political consequences of your research actions.

You can either help or hinder—to claim neutrality is to shelter behind a myth. You can't fail to affect 'the researched' with your actions: even the mere asking of a question can lead people to think differently or set further in concrete what is already thought. You can only choose whether to help or to hinder. To not choose is still to choose.

One way of improving the value, quality and ethical nature of questionnaires is to choose questions which assist the person answering them to reflect more deeply on what they themselves think or are experiencing. Fran Peavey (1994) has helpfully distinguished between more and less strategic questions. The least change-oriented questions are the ones which merely ask the respondent to report on existing states. In this way we discover (often in great detail) that there still is poverty, that services are inadequate, that class background affects educational outcomes, and so on. Most research stays at this level. Think of the amount of research that ends with recommendations that there be more research and more documentation of what we already pretty much know. Less often do we ask the next kind of questions about how do people *feel* about these states of affairs—and how much do they feel, and what seems to be constraining change, and what would people like instead, and how could that be achieved, and what would be needed for that, and what could be done right now in that direction. While these are all equally appropriate questions to research, we often leave them off the questionnaire and try to answer them ourselves, as researchers or consultants, off the tops of our own heads when we are writing up the conclusions and recommendations *without any data to guide us.*

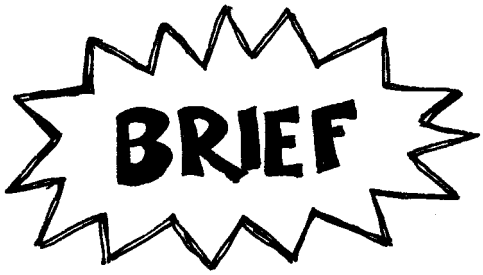
It is such a simple matter to ask *both* kinds of questions as part of the fieldwork—questions about how things are now as well as questions about how they might be otherwise.

So . . . use a questionnaire, if you use one at all, as a way of raising critical questions, and of getting useful information *to be fed back* to those who gave it and who seek it (just as with all other research information).

Questionnaire design

What is a 'good' questionnaire—besides being one which asks questions which will lead to deeper

understanding and useful change? Well, it is also an act designed to maximise communication, so you will need to do everything you can to make it *clear, attractive, accessible, informative* and



You want the respondent to know that filling in the questionnaire will be:

- useful,
- enjoyable (if not exactly fun, that it will help her or him think about some issues),
- easy (if it is),
- quick (leave the sheets of 188 questions to those with plenty of time, money and experience),
- safe—that it won't or can't be used against them (if it is designed to help them). If you offer confidentiality (and that's not necessary for all questionnaires), then do so *and see that you honour it*, while remembering that in some jurisdictions the law will not give you 100% power to keep research data secret if, for example, the court demands it as evidence in a criminal trial (and you are not prepared to refuse the court and then possibly be charged yourself).

Here are some more tips.

Overall format

Avoid mess, clutter and confusion!

- Use photocopies of laser printed pages if at all possible. (Otherwise, use clear photocopies of electric typewriting.)
- Use large, clear computerised print headings to break up the appearance and show clearly what it's about.
- Use a letterhead, official crest or insignia or even a little illustration at the top of the front for the same reason, and also to convey legitimacy. You want people to distinguish in their minds between this and all the other pieces of paper that pass before their eyes. An attractive presentation promises an interesting experience.
- Use carefully laid-out and easy-to-fill-in questions. Tick boxes ought to be ruled in carefully, typed with those special computer characters, or square brackets.
- Use indenting, lines, different typefaces, boxing, etc. carefully.

An example of an attractive simple questionnaire appears on page 50.

Check your questions. Are they:

- Necessary?
- Repetitive?
- Too ambitious?
- Ambiguous?
- Vague?
- Too wordy?
- Unintentionally leading?

Use clear, direct ordinary speech—generally, you can write questions the way you'd ask them in conversation. Avoid long words, unfamiliar terms, leading and double-barrelled questions such as 'Do you think public transport, if you use it in this area, is adequate?'

Depending on your starting point, you might ask instead:

a How do you get about? (perhaps have a multiple-choice answer)
b Do you get about as much as you'd like?
c Is public transport in this area useful to you?
d Do you think public transport in this area could be improved in any ways to help you?
e If yes, can you suggest how?

You can provide preambles which ensure an informed answer. For example: 'The local Council is not yet convinced our neighbourhood needs a kindergarten. We have a hunch that it does need one, but need to know if this is correct. Could you answer the following questions for us?'

But beware of suggestive or leading questions such as, 'Do you think a kindergarten in this area would be a good thing?' It would be harder to say no to this—and the answers may actually not be very useful. What you *do* need to know is:

a Does the respondent have a four-year-old child (or a three- or even two-year-old—since, given a lead time for building, this would be the population to be served)?
b What needs do the parents see their children as having?
c In what kinds of ways could those needs best be met?
d Would a kindergarten in the locality meet their needs next year/the year after/or the year after that?

In this example, a questionnaire may be just a very crude 'starter' to a research effort. On the bottom of the questionnaire might be an invitation to attend an evening meeting to discuss the various possibilities. Those who attend and what they have to say may be far more valid indicators of interest. Later, a small group of parents might go door-to-door for short interviews—followed by a second evening meeting. An improved questionnaire may come at the end, and even incorporate an actual enrolment form: a hard test!

By the end of a more comprehensive research effort like this, you might have more compelling data on your hands as well as the organised capacity to catch the imagination of funding authorities—using your research to demonstrate the need.

Question format

There are various ways of phrasing the questions and arranging for the answers on questionnaires. Here are some of them:

Open/closed questions

A *closed* or *fixed choice* or *structured* question is one in which the respondent selects from a pre-given list of alternative replies such as that shown below.

If you had to choose just one, which of the following do you consider to be the *best* feature of living in the Shire of Buninyong? Please tick one:

Beauty of area	[ ] 1*	Family ties	[ ] 6
Cheaper land/housing	[ ] 2	Friendly people	[ ] 7
Climate	[ ] 3	Rural environment	[ ] 8
Close to work/services	[ ] 4	Shire services	[ ] 9
Educational facilities	[ ] 5	Other	[ ] 10

An *open-ended* or *unstructured* question enables an answer to be recorded in full (or to the extent of the space!) such as that which follows.

What do you consider to be the best feature or features of living in the Shire of Buninyong?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

How do the two methods compare? Well—they have different uses and there are different drawbacks in each case. The following table summarises these.

All the following are closed or fixed-choice, structured questions. Other formats can involve 'tick the box' or 'rank in order of preference (from 1 = highest to 10 = lowest)' or 'give a mark out of 10 (from 10 = excellent to 0 = poor)'. The latter example often works well in a country where the education system has relentlessly given marks out of ten over a period of six to twelve years!

	Values/uses	Drawbacks/problems
Open-ended (unstructured)	• Useful for exploratory research to generate range, meanings, novel ideas. • Very flexible—can achieve depth—gives respondents freedom to express complexity and diversity. • Validity can be high.	• Requires some skill in asking the questions, and interpreting the results. • Can be messy. • Answers often lack uniformity; require some skill to categorise and count and compute. • More time-consuming to fill in (respondents may not be bothered) and time-consuming to analyse (categorise in order to compute).
Closed-choice (fixed, alternative, multiple-choice, structured)	• Useful for statistical analysis—easy to count and compute. • Easy to interpret (*if* questions clear). • Neat. • Quick. • Reliability can be high.	• May not have catered for all possible answers (hence channelling and distorting responses, reductionist). • Questions may not be relevant, or important. • Requires pre-testing and prior open-ended research to ensure choices offered are the relevant ones. • See other comments on problems of questionnaires.

* The numbering of the answer spaces to many of the questions in the questionnaire examples is to assist computer analysis. See the section on use of computers in this chapter and on analysis in Chapter 7.

Attitudinal statements
Here's an example:

Do you AGREE or DISAGREE with each of the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Public transport is good in this suburb.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
I know the names of most people living in nearby houses.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
I am friendly with most of the people living in nearby houses.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
I am happy with the job being done by the local council.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

Judgemental position on issues
For example:

For each of the following, say whether you think it is a SERIOUS, MODERATE or NOT SERIOUS problem in this suburb.

	Serious	Moderate	Not serious
Youth unemployment	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Unemployment (general)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Teenage drinking and drug use	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Vandalism of public property	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Elderly house-bound people	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Opportunities for job training/ retraining	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

Rating using simple categories
For example:

We are interested in finding out how local residents feel about services presently being provided by, or in, the Shire. For each of the following tick whether you feel the local service is GOOD, ADEQUATE or POOR in your part of the Shire.

	Good	Adequate	Poor
Maintenance	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Child health services	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Parks, quiet recreation areas	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Sporting grounds, facilities	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Interest of local councillors in residents' problems	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

Planning indicators/ranking
For example:

So the school can know when to plan community activities it would help to know when people might have free time. For each of the following times, tick if the time is usually suitable, possibly suitable or always unsuitable.

	Suitable	Possibly suitable	Unsuitable
Weekday mornings	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Weekday afternoons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Weekday late afternoons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Weekday evenings	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Saturday mornings	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
Saturday afternoons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

Sequence of questions

Various principles should be considered in this matter but the primary way of getting this right is to know your respondent audience or population. Take note of the following points:

- Questions relating to personal background of respondents are sometimes best placed at the end of a questionnaire when people are keen to

address the topic of the questionnaire; on the other hand, if the topic is sensitive, such routine and easily answerable questions can set people at ease; some personal background items (such as age category, sex, home location) may be able to be completed by observation in a face to face interview.

- Questions can often be grouped into related areas. This provides the opportunity to break up the dense content of the pages by using boxes or lines or headings, and often makes the preparation of the report an easier task if it can follow the same logical sequence.
- Factual/attitudinal questions: some consideration should be given to the order of presenting these. One consideration is that the respondent might or might not be asked questions early in the survey which may influence or inform an attitude to later questions depending on your purposes.
- Easy/difficult questions: easy, impersonal, quick-to-complete questions might usefully be placed at the start of the question sheet. These initial questions may need to appear to be directly relevant to the stated purposes of the research. More difficult questions might better be asked at the end, or follow on logically from previous questions.

'The pilot'

You may have read about 'pretesting' or 'piloting' a questionnaire—many people skip this stage because it sounds a bit technical and they're sure their questionnaire is OK. You'll almost always be surprised! All you have to do is try it out on a few people. Even just trying it on one person can often illuminate problems you could not have imagined. If there are different kinds of people to be interviewed (for example, an old Ballywollopper, a young Ballywollopper, and an immigrant Ballywollopper), give it to one (or more) of each. Try it out to find out if it is easy, clear, and so on. Also check how long it takes—and then have a look at what it comes up with. See whether it generates impossible information (too much, too hard to categorise, irrelevant and so on). Then make the necessary changes. Sometimes pilots expand into or become the main effort—especially if you trial the questionnaire with a larger number. Some researchers advise a 10% pilot, but the percentage depends on the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity (similarity or difference) within the main group of people being questioned.

Response and refusal rates

Some people won't fill in your questionnaire. This may be due to anger, annoyance, mistrust, lack of time or sheer disinterest.

A 'refusal rate' calculates the number not responding in relation to the total number who were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Say you sent out 200 questionnaires and got back 164; that would be an 82% response rate. Try to predict how high an acceptable refusal rate might be beforehand—you may be able to take steps to lower it.

Experience in Australia and New Zealand seems to be that response rates should run at about 80–90% for face to face interviewing and, at best, half that for posted questionnaires. But these are very dependent on the nature and purposes of the questionnaire and also whether respondents are known personally to the researcher. Response rates fall as people become more mobile and more surveyed. Telephone interviews have also often got quite high response rates, although this may be changing in the era of the answering machine! Response rates also can rise when people are known personally to the researcher, when pre-publicity is used, when a quick response is requested, when a follow-up reminder letter is sent, and when, most importantly, the 'researched' see the research as of interest or in their interests. Do not expect high response rates if you have not got (or are not able to get) this factor right. For example, asking prison officers how they seek customer feedback may only get a response from a small number who think that asking prisoners their views might serve a useful purpose.

Your attitude to response rates can be roughly as follows:

0–20%	The project may not have succeeded—unless representativeness doesn't matter or somehow it is so homogeneous that a tiny sample is representative.
20–40%	A bit too low—unless there are reasons (very touchy subject, impractical to do better, etc.). You must account for the low rate (for example, only the most courageous, healthy, at home or whatever kind of people have answered), as it may otherwise represent too strong a bias.
40–60%	Bearable—but again you must account: it would still be easy for people to reject your findings.
60–80%	You can mostly relax. As a formality of rigour, account for the non-response.
80–100%	Good work! (Still the accounting formality of rigour applies.)

It is often better to use a smaller sample and use extensive follow-up to obtain a high response rate.

TECHNIQUE F: SAMPLING

Sampling is not so much a technique to *get* information, but more a way of ensuring that any technique that is used will get information from people that more or less represents accurately all the people in the total group or population—*if* that is something relevant to your research.

Sampling involves making decisions about who to ask questions of when you can't get access to all the people who could possibly be involved in your project. You find you can only handle a fraction of the 'total population', say of all infant welfare users, or all potential telephone counselling service-users—and it matters that those who are asked the questions be representative of the views of the total group.

What is a sample?

Now a sample is just like the 'sample' of paint or cloth you take to match in a shop. The characteristics of the sample need to faithfully represent those of the rest of the paint or cloth 'population'. Sample bags at the Royal Agricultural Show used to do the same thing. For example, the soap bag was full of tiny replica soaps. Whitman's sampler picks out a cross-section of a much wider range of chocolates.

When you choose a sample of your 'researched' population, it needs to do the same thing. If you're researching the local unemployed young people, your sample must be of local unemployed young people. But more than this, it must 'capture' all of the characteristics of local unemployed young people. Now in this case we would commonly ignore some characteristics—such as height, hair colour, or whether they have Irish aunties—and sample for some other characteristics we think are relevant—such as education, gender and 'tribe' (interests, values, dress code and lifestyle).

Often we overlook why we choose some standard characteristics and not others, and just systematically sample for these and things like place of residence, marital status and income levels, without thinking, 'Is it really important?' It may be. But it is worth thinking about.

The 'for who'/'for what' of your research defines whether sampling is important and, if it is, what kind of sampling would be best.

So, think about your 'researched' population as a wall of wallpaper or bolt of cloth!—and work out what the sample would have to be like to be representative.

Now a small sample of a very large complex population will generally be 'weaker' than a large sample of a smaller population—as it is less likely to represent all the characteristics accurately. (An example of this is a small piece of vinyl flooring with a large pattern.) On the other hand, a large sample of a very small or homogeneous population might represent 'excessively' or unnecessarily and a smaller sample would do. (An example here would be plain coloured floor covering.)

Get 'a feel' for the 'population' of your research and think of what might seem like a viable sample. Use your commonsense. Imagine what criticisms might be made of your sample and see if you can counter them. When you write up your results it will be good to show you considered such criticism. Criticism of a sample is one of the easiest and most common ways to 'shoot down' a research design and its results.

If you already know what you're sampling for, you may only need a tiny sample. For example, the American Gallup Poll and the Australian Bureau of Statistics have so refined their procedures that they require only a few hundred people in a sample to fairly accurately represent many millions of people.

On the other hand, if you are trying to establish what are the relationships among race, income, sex, age and the need for dental care—if you had four alternative choices for race, and income; two for sex; and five for age; and a yes/no need for dental care, there would be 320 possible profiles or sets of responses! Even assuming that only a sample of ten in each profile would yield reliable results (unlikely) and that people would be evenly distributed across categories (even less likely!), then the minimum sample size would be 3200!!! (Note that at the low cost of $10 per individual, which might buy you a phone survey, this survey would cost more than $30 000!!)*

However, if you're not interested in establishing accurate relationships between lots of variables, and instead are concerned to illuminate a situation, get insight, or collect information about a particular event, very much smaller numbers may do. This could be called a *purposive sample*. (Some texts call this haphazard or non-probability sampling.) Rather than allowing you to make conclusions about trends, it allows you to discuss the range of possibilities in much greater depth.

But if you do want information about 'distributions' (for example, how many think such and such), you will have to work out a representative sample. Don't be too overwhelmed by the technicalities (you can always consult a statistician or quantitative survey researcher), and chances are you are only dealing with a single program or small group situation, or are doing an exploratory study and only wanting a rough indication anyway.

For small-scale research the chief aim in sampling is to avoid gross bias. For example, you want to know how many people would use a youth centre

* Example drawn from B.L. Gates 1980, *Social Program Administration*, Prentice Hall, NJ, pp. 131–2.

if it was built on a spare Council-owned block of land. You might ask everyone in your street. You, however, live in the street next to the block of land. Now you need to find out if young people would travel from a mile away, and how and under what circumstances.

Or you want to find out if there is much contact between aged services workers so you group interview at their regional meeting. But now you're talking to precisely those workers who attend and see each other—at meetings! What about all those not there?

Or you want to talk to a cross-section of Melbourne to see whether they know about a program for unemployed older people and you get a sample from the phone book—but what if 98.5% of the highest income group have phones, but only 78.4% of the households of the lowest income group have phones, and older people more often have lower incomes? And who might be more likely to need to know (and more likely to notice an advertised program) about help for the older unemployed?

There are some common 'textbook' methods of sampling, but you will really need to use your own commonsense to work out whether any sample you rely on is likely to be biased in a way that is not useful to your purposes. The common methods are random sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling and multi-stage sampling.

Random sampling—This is where each member of the whole group or 'population' has an equal chance of being selected. You will need a list of everyone in your population (often difficult to get). Then count them and assign a number to each. You can 'draw' your random sample by finding a Table of Random Numbers (often printed in the back of statistics textbooks) and sticking a pin in anywhere (random start), then reading out the list of numbers that follows.

Or if you have several streets of households, start anywhere and pick every third, fifth or tenth house until you have a reasonable proportion.

Stratified sampling—If it is known that a population may be divided into subgroups or strata which vary between themselves with respect to the characteristic sampled for, then a separate sample can be taken from each stratum.

Cluster sampling—If a population is clustered, a sample may be taken of one of the clusters and every individual in the one cluster questioned. Accuracy is reduced, but so also might be cost and travelling time.

Multi-stage sampling—A sample of first stage units is selected, and a further sample from within these is chosen (and so on). Say you sample a number of census districts, then you sample a number of zones within them, and finally houses within the zones.

If your resources allow, and you only have a small population, a 'total population' solves all sampling problems!!

And remember that there are academics and agencies (such as Bureaus of Statistics) which offer assistance in the area of drawing samples (see the section on statistics in Chapter 6). Once you're into this level of sophistication, however, and need to know about sampling distribution, standard deviation and standard error, either rethink your project or see an experienced researcher.

TECHNIQUE G: PARTICIPATING AND OBSERVING

Most social research actually begins with a period of informal observation—generally *participant* observation: that is, observation of a social situation by someone taking part in that social situation.

However, this is generally *informal* and neither very self-conscious nor systematically recorded.

To transform it into a research technique, it is necessary to be highly aware and very reflective about the social situation being examined, and to keep records which can later be drawn on, written up and shared for further discussion regarding meaning and implications.

The research textbooks generally talk about a continuum between passive observer through to active participant, and caution about the danger of loss of objectivity for the active participant who 'goes native' (using a phrase used by anthropologists). But this is a little misleading because the passive 'watcher' can be just as unreflective, while the active (even 'native') participant may build in ways of keeping her or his mental distance in order to sit back and reflectively think about the situation.

As well, there is really no such thing as a pure observer—even someone anonymously just sitting watching in a supermarket is still participating in the social situation. Indeed, they may be more likely to be noticed and questioned than someone who does their observation while pushing a trolley around!!

Nor can pure participation be sustained if something is being researched and thus 'problematised'—in the sense that there is a gap between 'what is' and 'what could alternatively be'.

And this is the crux of the matter.

The real issue of participant observation is not the amount of participation versus observation, but the extent to which the person can *question* the grounds for the action being carried out. That is, the extent to which the person can *reflect,* in her or his mind, or on her or his own actions—and on those of the others in the social situation: the extent to which you can mentally stand outside yourself and look at yourself acting.

This means that you the observing researcher or co-researchers need 'the space'—maybe even literally—to get away from the immediate, taken-for-granted situation, and think, 'What is going on here?', 'What are they doing there?', 'Why do we do this?', 'What were the conditions for them continuing to act like that?', or 'What made us change then?'

As well, although every observer participates of necessity, you can choose to be more *active* either in the sense of consciously trying to fit in better, or in the sense of actively pursuing the meanings of situations by questioning other participants—for example, by offering interpretations, testing ideas out, challenging or playing devil's advocate, presenting hypothetical or ideal situations to check reactions, and so on.

The important thing in both cases is to be *consciously aware* of what you are doing. You will be mainly trying to increase communication and get people's cooperation and trust. Check that your approach assists this. You may need at some times to be more discreet about recording—but not secretive. If you've thought of being a secret observer, you'll need to think right through *at the outset* what the consequences of this will be in terms of loss of faith if and when people find out you've been 'spying'.

If it's taken you a while to realise yourself that you've been quietly observing, let people know as soon as possible. Share your observations with them so they feel part of it and not alienated by the process.

There are ethical issues here but they are often not simple ones. They include issues of trust—and its maintenance or betrayal, and power—and its use or misuse. Often participant observation may most easily resolve potential problems it faces by seeking informed consent. But what about researching small town racism or football violence or even just discriminatory practices in a hospital ward or school room? If people persist in not recognising a problem it often takes a large swag of data about how things are now to convince people. Do you announce what you are doing? Will the incriminating practices promptly cease (only to begin again when you've left the site)?

If the research is relatively or entirely covert, it becomes particularly important to have taken time to think about it from as many angles as possible and talk it through with a group of people, so the ethics and purposes and possible alternative methods for researching are clear and comfortable.

As with all other research techniques, a clear identification of the 'for who' and 'for what' of the research will make it easier to work through problems of getting into the social situation to be observed (often called 'the field' by researchers), problems of staying there and working out how to present yourself, and problems of 'getting out' and sharing and acting on the findings.

Your final problem will be that of having generated huge amounts of undigested observations.

At first you should take detailed notes (field notes), keeping interpretation to a minimum. Day-by-day diaries are one way of doing this. As time goes by you should work out what themes are emerging—things you are hearing or seeing frequently, things that seem important to other participants, and so on. Keep the reflections about the primary observations as well (possibly in a column alongside). Then work out how to check these—what questions to ask to make sure you are hearing or seeing what you think you are, and who to ask, etc.

As well, you should arrange one or a series of

more formal 'feeding back' methods—perhaps as a beginning for the use of other techniques. This also enables your secondary reflections (on the primary observations) to be shared and added to by others.

TECHNIQUE H: AUDIOVISUAL EQUIPMENT

Besides using tape recorders or cameras (video or movie, as well as still) as mediums for recording interviews or meetings, they can be used to *directly* generate material that answers questions or generates understanding and stands as evidence in itself.

You could record a day in the life of a program, an hour of classroom time or a teaching session, a group discussion, a professional seminar, program highlights, staff meetings, playground activity, etc. You could do this over time to see change. And you could also use other videos (including videos from TV or commercial origins) as 'data' for analysis. Such audiovisual records may be useful as starters for further discussion, dialogue or questioning—either between individuals or by groups.

They can capture the tone and inflection of voice, facial expression and verbal and body language used by participants in a situation. Make sure people are familiar with the equipment—the best way is for them to use and control it themselves.

Remember the practical and ethical problems involved (refer to the discussion on ethics in Appendix B) and think through *beforehand* the consequences for the people you are trying to do the research for. You may need to wipe tapes and destroy negatives if it's agreed they could be damaging or if they've served their use.

TECHNIQUE I: WRITTEN RECORDS AND ACCOUNTS

As well as talking to people, and observing situations directly, there is a range of written things that researchers can draw on for indirect evidence of what is going on. Think about whether you could make any use of the following historical or other records:

- Newspapers—local, state, national.
- Agency or program records, or files (of minutes, agendas, reports, statistical information, letters, memos, circulars, agency publications, timetables, useage rates and patterns, photos, lists or rules, personal records, etc.).

When you read such written documents you do what the textbooks refer to as 'content analysis'. Again you must be clear in your own mind what you are trying to find out and read the documents with these questions in mind. These questions are exactly comparable to the questions you ask in questionnaires or interviews.

Remember that written documents often represent the 'official' views of 'reality', hence they can be useful to find out what, for example, an organisation—or those with the power in an organisation—thinks it is doing, or wants other people to think it is doing. There may be other quite different perceptions when, for example, you chat informally to lower ranks of workers in that organisation. For this reason, most written documents should not be relied on as accounts of *all* the 'realities' of a situation, but if you can read of some of the ways they represent reality, that can tell you plenty of things too.

Another form of written records or accounts is people's *own* stories written for the research. An example would be where people write poems, or true or fictionalised accounts of their experiences of going through economic recession.

TECHNIQUE J: THE CASE STUDY

A case study can be generated by using a variety of techniques (interview, questionnaire, observation, self-written account) to assemble a range of information about a single 'case'—a single individual, incident, event, group or organisation. Sometimes the case may be used as representing a broader population—as a sample.

It may involve information collected over time to show a process, or how change has taken place, and it has the advantage of allowing much more detailed and possibly deeper and more interconnected understandings of what is going on. For example, a handful of case studies may complement a larger scale, more superficial and fragmenting survey technique.

The case study has been a technique used frequently in the area of education, where a single child or classroom is studied in detail, often over a period of time.

TECHNIQUE K: SOCIAL INDICATORS

There is much talk at the moment—especially in government and other circles—about 'social indicators'. In some departments, social indicators are already in use.

Like written records, they are an indirect way of trying to 'get at' what is going on in a situation. They are a statistical surrogate or symptom of something that cannot be observed directly. For example, the infant mortality rate (the number of babies who die compared to the whole number of babies who are born) could be used as a social indicator of community health; or the number of industrial strikes could be used as a social indicator of class conflict; or the number of divorces could be used as a social indicator of change in women's roles.

The term is being used not just in the ordinary sense that every sign or symbol is an indicator that stands for such and such (for example, that the word 'wet' indicates, or stands for, a particular tactile experience), but rather as a 'package' of statistics which together stand for or indicate some general aspect of the quality of life. Terms such as 'health', 'freedom' and 'well-being' are the kinds of ideas that the social indicators 'movement' has tried to 'fill out' in a tangible, measurable way with groupings of indicating statistics. For example:

Term	Example of indicators
Health	Rates of expenditure on health services, hospital capacities and admissions, use of health services; life expectancy, morbidity and mortality rates
Quality of housing	Amount of space per occupant, rates of amenities, e.g. bathrooms, expenditure on domestic fuel, length of 'life' of housing stock
Disadvantage	Income, social organisation, family stability, educational levels, mental and physical health, economic self-sufficiency

Social indicators are intended by their proponents to be descriptive, assist analysis, contribute to public policy and program development and evaluation. They can include survey material from interviewing (for example, 'How do you feel about your job?') and documented statistics (for example, the number of social security recipients). More recently they have been adapted as 'performance indicators' to provide statistics which are intended to represent the effects, outputs, outcomes or impacts of services or organisations or individuals in them.

There are a number of criticisms which have not been fully resolved:

- There may be a lack of 'fit' between indicator and indicated. Since all indicators are 'proxies', wrong meanings can be ascribed—or conflicting perceptions held. To give just one example—one person may define 'urban deprivation' as best indicated by kind of housing, health and recreation facilities while another might emphasise inequalities of income, education and employment. Just think whether you agree that low usage of general practitioner services 'stands for' good health—or whether instead it might mean people can't afford them, don't know about them, or are intimidated by them. Or whether high throughput in a psychiatric ward means people are being treated more effectively—or there is a heavy reliance on short-term drug therapy.

  As we have seen elsewhere in this guide, the only way to establish which is the best meaning is to use other more direct kinds of research—perhaps observational, interview or other more participatory methods.
- Another problem—if you value participation in decisions about what is 'true' or 'of value'—is that social indicators research has evolved as a highly technical procedure with high levels of expertise required to carry out the computer-based manipulation of data. The analysis of many social indicators has become quite removed from the sphere of the non-expert. Given the 'remote control' aspects of the technique, it can easily become a highly manipulated form of research.

The researched may not even be aware they are being researched.

- A third problem relates to claims of apparent neutrality; yet given that they are not and cannot be value free, the question arises *'whose* values prevail' in the forming of indicators.

Refer to the sections on statistics in Chapter 6 and analysis in Chapter 7 for further comments.

TECHNIQUE L: SURVEYS

A brief description of a survey was given at the beginning of this chapter. A survey is a *composite* technique—much as are social indicators, action research and community studies. That is, they rely, or can rely, on a *variety* of techniques (interview, questionnaire, content analysis, sampling, etc.).

Survey research is almost always 'top-down'; research concentrating on a mass of unconnected individuals and often done by and for a powerful elite or interest—government or commercial. (Most social research is market research, almost all market research is survey research.) It has become the dominant form of social research because central agencies—by definition at a distance from the populations they serve or sell things to—have lost deep daily direct touch with their fellow citizens and customers and no longer know about them. The same goes for lower levels of decision-making: even your local or small area service may no longer 'know its people' (even though they may be sure they do). And one day even a family will have to circulate a questionnaire survey to ascertain preferences or activity patterns if the trends prevail for separate bedrooms, separate cars, all adults in the workforce, independent mealtimes and being glued to family members' respective computers and TVs! (Perhaps e-mail will be the best technique!)

Before starting your own survey, you ought to carefully check your purposes. Check whether the information is available elsewhere or whether it would be quicker, cheaper and more appropriate to use an alternative method.

Quite simple surveys can be done using quite simple questionnaires, manually processed. However, many agencies are dealing with larger populations and multiple needs for feedback, in which case they may wish to use computer technology.

In human services to date there has tended to be someone who is the computer buff who looks after the massive and often quite sophisticated effort of collecting and processing 'The Official Statistics' (contacts, case work, groups held, etc.). Often this is done in a rather ritualistic way for a funding agency (who themselves may not do a lot with them). Perhaps almost no-one ever sees them, or they are circulated routinely and barely glanced at. And they may almost never get used for anything but for the most rudimentary monthly, quarterly or annual counting efforts. On the other hand, individual practitioners may barely have the know-how or the time for the simplest survey—computerised or not—much less non-survey research. Of course there are outstanding exceptions, but this seems a common picture: all the effort goes into an ambitious but rarely utilised computerised statistical database, and almost no effort goes into anything else.

We think that the more likely reason (and resources) for a piece of computerised research might be when a tertiary student does a research placement in a human services agency and brings to bear on it the expertise of their university. For this reason, and because a rare such student may continue to mount surveys when no longer a student, we include the following piece on do it yourself computerisation. Beyond this, seek specialist help!

TECHNIQUE M: USE OF COMPUTERS

Computers are not exactly a data collection method so much as a way of organising or analysing and synthesising very large amounts of data, such as interview or discussion group transcripts or responses on questionnaires. Do-it-yourselfers may have little call for even this sized effort, but, as computers are now found in agencies throughout the community sector, they can be used for research purposes as well as for recording agency service data, writing memos and reports, and producing newsletters. The greatest uses of computer technology in do it yourself social research may be twofold. Firstly, you might use or re-use data collected and available on an agency or service computer system—the familiar 'stats' collected in most human services, but which are often a very underused resource. Secondly, human services professionals in their education or training courses may typically learn to do a survey, analysed statistically by a computer package, and may make their survey useful to their client and agency.

Computers have a range of other potential uses, from keeping track of what your tasks are and whether you have carried them out (on simple spreadsheet or even wordprocessing software packages), through to performing complex statistical formulae calculations that were once done by hand.

You can use wordprocessing software to do simple searches. For example, if you are researching child abuse and wonder what language professionals are using in their conversation or discourse, and an initial read-through *seems* to indicate they prefer the terms 'difficulty' or 'behaviour resulting from pressure' or whatever, you can now search and you find eighteen occurrences of 'difficulty/difficulties', five of 'behaviour', and only three of 'abuse/abusive/abuser', etc. Then you might raise the question 'why' for a next stage of the inquiry. Or you may use an ordinary wordprocessing program to type in taped discussion and then edit it on screen for presentation, perhaps

organising it under simple headings, cutting and pasting quotes, and so on.

You can use database (for example, DBASE) or spreadsheet software (for example, EXCEL) to keep records (for example, a little like the old card indexes) or for small surveys.

The abovementioned are general kinds of software used for research purposes but some software is specifically designed or useful for social research. Most kinds are now available on IBM and Macintosh computers. Current examples include EXCEL (for layout of a questionnaire, for punching in data, and getting simple cross-tabulations or graphs), SAS and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) which will analyse the data for statistical significance, and Ethnograph and NUD•IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) which analyse whole texts for themes organised in 'trees' or sub-files of related themes.

Given that the most popular data collection method is a survey and its most popular technique a questionnaire, computer use is perhaps most associated with analysing material using this approach. Associated with the questionnaire is a coding sheet which 'translates' people's responses into numbers (or numerical values). You could work out the coding beforehand so that the questionnaire can be printed with the codes already on it. The numbers associated with people's responses can then be entered into the computer (once called 'punching in the data' as it involved literally punching holes in cards which were fed in and read by the machine). This numerical data can then be processed by the computer (added up, cross-tabulated, tested using a range of formulae, etc.). If some of the questions are answered with written verbal responses, these have to be analysed under various themes or categories, and the latter coded (numbered). Coding, entering the data into the computer and then verifying for data entry errors can be a tedious, time-consuming process. With the advent of new technology, this process is beginning to change. Laptop computers are increasingly used in small-scale surveys. The interviewer, using a structured questionnaire, enters responses from each respondent directly into a database or a data file in the laptop. Data scanning technology has now taken this step of simplification and automation further, so that instead of the researcher entering the data directly into a laptop computer, the questionnaires are optically scanned into the computer, allowing analysis by a statistical or database package. The software can immediately verify if the respondent has not filled them in correctly.

The lastest technology not only allows the researcher to create data collection forms, but also to scan in the responses, and verify and 'export' them to a database or statistical package, all in the one program.

Further possibilities include use of the Internet to quickly and cheaply arrange and capture written dialogue, or to circulate questionnaires to and receive them back from large numbers of people, worldwide as well as within a service system or organisation.

TECHNIQUE N: 'COMMUNITY' AND COMMUNITY NEEDS STUDIES

A brief definition of a 'community study' was given at the beginning of this chapter—and they often comprise part of a community needs study. Interestingly, 'community' studies have emerged as a research speciality precisely as the traditional phenomenon of 'community' has become least likely to exist. High rates of residential and job mobility and of domestic privacy, combined with the changes in urban organisation of production and consumption (commuter workers, dormitory suburbs, regional shopping centres and mega-stores), have broken down the economic and social intradependence of localities, the residents of which once would have known and been known to each other as a matter of practical necessity.

Since the 1970s we have seen a lot of social development programs aimed at re-knitting the social fabric of local geographic areas in an attempt to provide more mutual support, and an upsurge of human services essentially filling the gap once met by family and local community members. In most recent times we have seen many governments try to reduce the costs of these services and programs by appealing to 'the community'—particularly women and others styled 'carers'—at a time when these resources are extremely thin on the ground. 'Community' research studies accompany these attempts so that community development and human services workers can 'find out' about the areas they are trying to work with.

As well as using a variety of techniques (interviews, observation, questionnaire surveys), the 'community' study commonly attempts (or should attempt) to assemble understandings about six major aspects:

- History and change that has taken place over time.
- Physical environment.
- Residents, their characteristics and their 'needs'.
- Organisations.
- Patterns of interaction and communication.
- Relationships of power (often called 'leadership').

One of the best references we know on this kind of research is Chapter 3, 'Getting to Know the Community' in Paul Henderson and David Thomas's book *Skills in Neighbourhood Work* (1981). There are numerous examples of community studies and community needs studies. You would probably do best to inquire about examples of good ones in your local area, as well as look in a university or college library under the key words. Remember that most urban communities change quite radically as a result of

local economic and social changes. For example, a public housing area may experience waves of different ethnic groups as immigration patterns change. The Greek suburb of someone's childhood has become Spanish by the time they leave home, and is now transforming into Vietnamese when they revisit. And the low income, inner city, working class factory area of 20 years ago is fast becoming a trendy area for young professionals and office consultancies run from renovated studio warehouses, just prior to them all shifting to bayside outer suburbs to raise children (suburbs currently housing an elderly population who raised their children there post-war)!

TECHNIQUE O: EVALUATION

There's a lot of literature around that makes evaluation seem like a very sophisticated activity. There's 'formative' and 'summative', 'input', 'output' and 'throughput' evaluation and lots of technical distinctions between goals, objectives and aims.

Basically, if you want to 'evaluate' something—a program, a service, your own or your team's activities, or those of others—you want to '(e)"value"' it. Firstly you want to see whether it has or hasn't value, merit, worth or significance. And secondly you may want to see whether it's doing what it ought to do.

What it 'ought to be doing' is what has been previously decided to be the valued overall 'mission', 'goals' or specific 'objectives'; that is, the ends or outcomes or the aimed-at ways of getting there.

The two major or common kinds of evaluation are:

- *Open inquiry* question-based evaluations which ask, what is the value (merit, worth or significance) of the evaluand (that which is being evaluated)?
- *Audit review*-style evaluations which ask about the things which have been pre-deemed valuable (meritorious, worthy or significant). This kind of evaluation needs to know what are the established goals or objectives or the desired activities and outcomes and can then ask, what is actually done? What are the actual outcomes? What is the assessment of the difference between these two (the desired and the actual)?

Now that makes it look simple! From then on it can tend to get complex.

Maybe the valued or 'desired outcomes' aren't clear. Maybe different people see things differently (and some of these people are more powerful than the others, and it is difficult to find out what the less powerful really value). Maybe people see what they're doing in different ways and in different ways at different times. Maybe it's difficult to even identify what's being done (lots of evaluation never gets further than describing or monitoring or just trying to say what is happening).

Finally, both desired and actual outcomes can be constantly changing! Just when you work out that the actions don't actually achieve the intended outcomes, the people say they're trying to do something new! Or, just when everyone's finally clarified their goals, you find their actions are changing as a result of the process! Suddenly you've got action research! Some researchers feel frustrated by this, but this reflects the problematic nature of much evaluative research. The very best evaluation—in terms of making a contribution to change or improved practice—is more likely to be wholeheartedly participative and action research. If you're trying to evaluate professional practice you suspect is authoritarian or dependency-creating, and if that practice becomes less so in the course of the research because the inquiry led people to be better informed, then you have achieved your end. If it becomes more so, or doesn't change, then you still eventually have to involve all the participants in the 'finding out' process since the aim is to improve the service anyway and the participants are those who are going to be doing the changing.

Evaluation research tends often to be the most obviously politicised and controversial precisely because it is *explicitly* value-based. Take, for example, a case where service-users want to evaluate the service they use. *Whose* values any research is based on is always a matter of choice (by those with the power to choose). People who are researchers may have difficulty always choosing, but do-it-yourselfers can choose *exactly* what values they wish to pursue. And remember, all research is value-based. There is no such thing as the value-free pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge is always *for* something or is partial and from some point of view (rather than another) and thus is selective, and the selection is driven inevitably by values.

The challenge is to be rigorous and sceptical so you 'find out' in ways that help you achieve your values—even when you may not at first like the results (and they may even lead you to reconsider your values!).

TECHNIQUE P: ACTION RESEARCH

See the beginning of this chapter for a brief description. 'Action research' may use any of the techniques already described but, additionally, it places the research in a time frame whereby, instead of a one-off, linear inquiry that 'starts' with questions and 'ends' with answers . . .

. . . it is a series of cycles that 'begin' and 'end' with action and incorporate research continuously as feedback from and to action. This is actually not unlike what *really* happens in the so-called linear research model. But action research is explicit and self-aware about knowing that not only do the questions come from previous experience and action (and that they can be *better* questions if the prior phases are given more rigorous attention and properly researched), but also that the real test of the findings (and any recommendations) lies in naturalistic experimentation with them by putting them into real-life practice and observing what happens *as a further part of the research*.

Thus, instead of the research ending with its recommendations for action, this is simply the beginning (or part one) of research which then goes on to implement that action, then study it, feeding back the results . . . and so on . . . action—research—action—research . . .

The time frame for one cycle or several may be a day, a week, a month or a few months, a year, ten years, or open-ended. This is usually what's meant when someone says that what's needed is 'ongoing research'.

It can be seen from this why action research is essentially *participatory* research. Not only does it explicitly require an inquiry group to ask the questions and follow through the process, but any 'findings' and new recommended actions cannot be imposed (as often those of formal research are, with usually disastrous consequences). They must be accepted by 'the researched' and 'the researched for'. Hence all relevant participants must be involved every inch of the way. In a sense it must be their

research, in their interests and something they can affect so it works better for them.

In essence, all the research described in this guide is participatory action research—and, although some efforts might only formalise one or two 'cycles' of the action, the necessity remains to involve the researched (having first clearly identified who the researched are) and the researched for (having also clearly identified what the research is for). This of course presents all sorts of new, exciting challenges—like *who* to involve and how, and how to prevent anyone feeling left out (particularly, say, if you are researching an entire services system!). Every paradigm has its puzzles!