# INTRODUCTION

## AN INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH METHODS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Introducing research methods in the social sciences is not an easy task given how complex the subject matter is. Social sciences, like all sciences, can be divided into categories (disciplines). Disciplines are frequently defined according to what they study (their empirical object) and how they study it (their particular problematization of the object). They are, however, by no means unitary entities. Within each discipline, multiple theories typically contend over the ability to tell provisional truths about the world. They do so by building on specific visions of the nature of the world (see the contribution on **ONTOLOGY**), reflections on how to generate scientific truth (see the contribution on **EPISTEMOLOGY**), systematic ways of collecting and analysing data (methods) and of justifying these methods as part of a coherent research design (methodologies).

Theories connect these various elements—ontological, epistemological, and methodological propositions—in the interpretation of specific scientific problems. Importantly, theories follow certain patterns and do not create these connections in an entirely haphazard way. However, such connections are never automatic or self-evident. One does not have to carry out discourse analysis if adopting a post-positivist stance. Theoretical considerations are not unimportant but they do not have to determine our methodological choices. Our approach to research methods in the social sciences is based on this core idea: method(ologie)s are partially autonomous. They are important to consider in and for themselves rather than merely as part of pre-existing ontologies or epistemologies. We approach disciplines, theories, epistemologies, and ontologies primarily through methodological framings and questions.

While this is only one approach to teaching and learning social sciences among many, it has a number of advantages. First, methods offer a coherent entry point into social science, allowing for a step-by-step and bottom-up pedagogical approach to theories and theoretical concepts. Second, since you are immediately exposed to methodological debates in carrying out your own research, this approach offers a hands-on and concrete way of helping you in this endeavour. Third, our approach also

allows you to explore the great variety of possibilities in social scientific research in a theoretically agnostic way, rather than treating methods as a necessary implication of your theoretical choices (which are often not yet consolidated at this stage of your learning). It is neither necessary nor desirable to always start with the main 'theories', 'schools of thought', or 'paradigms' as if everything else flowed naturally and inevitably from there.

This is why we offer an interdisciplinary and theoretically agnostic research toolkit that focuses primarily on research method(ologies) in the social sciences. Our contributors come from different disciplines, different theoretical backgrounds, and from a range of different countries.

## AN INTERDISCIPLINARY LOOK AT THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

This book favours an interdisciplinary approach to research methods in the social sciences (see the contribution on **INTERDISCIPLINARITY**). It does not include any contributions that would be relevant for only one discipline. Instead, all the contributions speak to several disciplines of social sciences. Yet, our approach does not overlook the distinctiveness of individual disciplines, let alone their existence. It favours an interdisciplinary rather than a transdisciplinary approach because we acknowledge that disciplines heavily structure the conduct of scientific inquiry. The days of Leonardo da Vinci, who could blend arts, philosophy, technical engineering, and the study of biological anatomy, or of René Descartes, who was a philosopher as much as a mathematician, are long gone. From the nineteenth century, we inherited a division of scientific knowledge into distinct disciplines. Although these disciplines are social constructs, we as social scientists are well positioned to recognize that even social constructs have real-world effects.

The existence of disciplines has the advantage of reducing complexity and helping the communication of research results. It facilitates the creation of consensus on what research is and should be. Which questions are important? What empirical domains should one focus on? Which debates could one contribute to and how can existing theories be improved? Every discipline also imposes a set of rules defining the appropriate behaviour for members of a scientific community. It is no accident that the word 'discipline' can refer either to a branch of knowledge or to a system of sanctions to induce certain behaviours (e.g. 'this child needs discipline'). Each discipline has its own rules for dealing, for example, with research funding, peer reviewing, data management, research collaboration, writing style, and career strategies. Institutions, such as university departments, professional organizations, research councils, and scientific journals, enforce these rules and sanction deviant behaviours. Despite multiple efforts to break up research silos and favour interdisciplinary research, disciplines remain surprisingly resilient. Conducting interdisciplinary research can even be risky, especially for early career scholars, who are more vulnerable to 'disciplinary' sanctions. Several of the contributions in this book acknowledge differences across disciplines and contrast their different practices. The contribution on **BEHAVIOURISM**, for example, discusses the

different influences that B. F. Skinner had on psychology and political science. Likewise, the contribution on **HERMENEUTICS** compares the practice of interpretation in law and history.

This book nevertheless goes well beyond the mere juxtaposition or comparison of different disciplines. Its interdisciplinary approach relies on the assumption that social science disciplines have more similarities than differences. Three main reasons explain these similarities. First, social sciences share largely the same intellectual foundations. Plato, Locke, and Foucault, for example, influenced disciplines as diverse as law, sociology, geography, and psychology. Second, all social sciences study complex phenomena, for which it is particularly difficult to establish causal relations. The social world is much less stable and predictable than the physical world due to a multiplicity of ever-evolving and interconnected variables. Third, social scientists are themselves part of the world they study, creating an ambiguous relationship between the object and the subject of scientific inquiry. This situation raises methodological challenges that natural and physical scientists do not have to face most of the time (quantum physics is an exception in this regard), while also opening up opportunities for reflexive and critical approaches.

For these reasons, similar intellectual trends and methodological debates have emerged across social science disciplines. Positivism, Marxism, and constructivism, for example, have influenced all social sciences, although to different degrees. Similarly, new empirical questions have emerged more or less at the same time in various different disciplines. Gender issues, as well as the relation between humans and their natural environment, became prominent questions in all the social sciences in a way that would have been difficult to imagine fifty years ago.

Not only has the social world influenced social sciences in similar ways, but also social science disciplines have influenced one another. Having cultivated expertise in a particular method, some disciplines have pollinated others with their expertise. Today, rigorous archival research is not limited to history, advanced statistical analysis is used beyond economics, social network analysis software is extensively used outside sociology, and participatory observation is taken seriously in disciplines other than ethnography. Debates that have emerged in one discipline have also diffused to other disciplines. Issues related to ethics with human participants, data availability, replication, and publication bias that appeared first in psychology, for example, have since informed debates in several other disciplines.

This cross-fertilization is a productive process. The most innovative ideas often arise by connecting previously disconnected literature streams. Cutting-edge research in the social sciences often develops at the crossroads of different disciplines. Behavioural economics, for example, emerged at the intersection of psychology and economics. Tellingly, Daniel Kahneman, who received the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 2002 for his research in behavioural economics, is a trained psychologist, and not an economist. Likewise, the hybridization between economics and other disciplines has given rise to many vibrant fields of study, including political economy, law and economics, ecological economics, and economic sociology. If social science disciplines are discrete islands, they are nonetheless part of the same archipelago; they

are connected by various bridges, and some of the most creative of their inhabitants frequently travel across them.

On the one hand, by reminding you of the disciplinary anchorage of scientific debates, this book bears testimony to the fact that scientific knowledge is always limited and the product of disciplinary histories. On the other, by putting the focus on interdisciplinarity, it prompts you to keep in mind the socially constructed nature of disciplines and hence the possibility of questioning their borders. With this perspective in mind, contributors to this volume come from various disciplines, including political science, law, economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, criminology, history, and anthropology. Several contributions were even co-authored by researchers from different disciplines. Moreover, all the contributions cover different disciplines, sometimes comparing their methodological approaches, and at other times discussing how one discipline has learned from another.

## A THEORETICALLY AGNOSTIC YET THEORETICALLY INFORMED RESEARCH MANUAL

In the same way as the entries of this book are committed to interdisciplinarity, they all try to avoid adopting a single theoretical perspective. Except for a few dealing with particular theoretical-epistemological orientations (see the contributions on **SCIENTIFIC REALISM**, **CRITICAL REALISM**, and **POSITIVISM, POST-POSITIVISM, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE**), the entries in this volume primarily focus on particular methods or concepts viewed through the lenses of their methodological implications.

That being said, methods and methodologies are never disconnected from wider theoretical considerations. Theoretical debates and questions cannot be avoided altogether. This book aims to strike a balance between foregrounding methodology and recognizing that methodological choices and debates are always rooted in ontological, epistemological, and theoretical choices and assumptions. However, our main point is that the rooted nature of methodological choices does not mean that they have to be determined by these roots.

This is why authors and co-authors have been chosen in order to favour theoretical pluralism. All the authors try to consider method(ologie)s independently from their own theoretical preferences in order to achieve this goal. They all recognize, to varying degrees and within limits, that researchers with different theoretical interests can draw on similar methods. Methods and methodologies can and do travel across disciplinary and theoretical (including epistemological and ontological) divides: methods like social network analysis or ethnographic fieldwork can span the divide between holistic and individualist ontologies, or between positivist and post-positivist epistemologies. Similarly, all the authors recognize that researchers with similar theoretical preferences can, for a multiplicity of reasons, opt for dissimilar research methods. Rational choice theorists can opt for quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods depending on their research object, research question, data availability, or their epistemological choices (e.g. instrumentalist empiricism or scientific realism). Some authors even engage in what is

referred to as 'methodological eclecticism', which builds on the idea that the researcher can use several (even seemingly incompatible) methods when exploring a research object in order to triangulate the results or to see how the results from various methods compare. However, methodological eclecticism is not a necessary consequence of the type of methodological pluralism we advocate.

One of the reasons for the (however limited) portability of methods across disciplinary and theoretical divides is that their concrete epistemological implications depend on what a researcher does with them—how they are put to work in the context of a concrete research project. Methods are tools that always have to be adapted and reflexively tailored to the purposes of a specific piece of research. It is also worth noting here that because different methods are more or less used, and more or less developed, depending on different academic contexts, we have consciously strived for geographical diversity among the contributors (UK, Canada, Germany, US, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, France, Italy, Finland, Slovakia . . .).

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK?

This book offers a systematic, state-of-the-art index on research methods, and is organized as an easily accessible encyclopaedia, with seventy entries presented in alphabetical order. The idea of this textbook originated from our hands-on experience in leading methodology seminars in the social and political sciences. We strongly felt that there was a pedagogical need for a student-centred, comprehensive yet compact, systematic, and conceptual index in teaching research methods.

Because it is student-centred, it provides much-needed practical information about a wide range of research methods including the most recent trends such as big data, all interconnected with cross-references, with concrete, real-world examples and 'how-to' advice built into the discussion of each concept. Because it is comprehensive, it is aimed at those of you following courses in any of the social sciences, which share the same methodological framework of reference, at least at the introductory level. All the contributions provide references and examples from different social science disciplines.

The selection of entries was an important part of preparing this book. We sought to make it comprehensive but compact, and this led to a few key decisions. We opted to focus on methodological concepts as opposed to more theoretical ones, although the line between the two is sometimes difficult to draw. We started the process by designing the book index, which covered many potential entries and identified the cross-cutting themes among them (such as 'validity'). We decided to offer a discussion of these cross-cutting themes in several entries. We thus selected only the most important concepts and ensured a broad coverage for each of them. This meant that, while maintaining an important degree of consistency across different entries, we gave our contributors the necessary space and flexibility to offer you a diversity of disciplinary and methodological standpoints.

This book targets students enrolled in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the social sciences. Each entry is organized to work at two levels. On the

one hand, each methodological concept is explained in detail, in a way that does not assume prior specialist knowledge, and with examples that provide an accessible introduction to the topic. On the other hand, each entry also provides more advanced tips and advice that will be extremely helpful for those of you in postgraduate programmes who are starting to conduct your own research projects.

The entries include not only the classical and well-established concepts of the field but also emerging and innovative ideas such as big data, network analysis, automated text analysis, and prosopography. Each entry provides a definition of the given methodological concept, discusses its underlying assumptions, presents its historical evolution, embeds it within the relevant methodological and theoretical debates, illustrates its practical and concrete use, identifies its strengths and weaknesses, pinpoints its current status in academic practices, and presents the recent controversies relating to its use. Moreover, each entry presents real-world examples to demonstrate how that methodological concept applies to the social sciences and is also accompanied by carefully selected references for further reading. While contributions expose you to various viewpoints and identify the relevant criticisms directed at the concepts, they deliberately avoid any normative judgement or policy recommendations, and remain open to the epistemological pluralism in the social sciences.

Importantly, this book is designed to have a flexible format. As an encyclopedia, it consists of a collection of short stand-alone entries, instead of presenting each topic in a linear manner, as a lecturer would do orally in class. This allows instructors to assign various contributions for different weeks without following a linear logic. You can read each contribution independently from the others. Similarly, it enables you to easily browse any concept whenever you need to. Each entry is connected to other entries by a cross-referencing system, using bold, grey capital letters. These cross-references, as demonstrated in our network diagram in Figure 1, will help you to link related concepts together and build a comprehensive understanding of research methods.

We believe this format, which is at the heart of our student-centred approach, best suits your needs, habits, and interests. At times, you can use the table of contents or the index to rapidly find the specific information you are looking for. At other times, you can navigate through the book following your mood and explore its content by jumping from one entry to another with the help of the cross-referencing system. This flexibility favours a learning process in which you progressively connect the dots and expand your knowledge according to your interests, starting with what you already know. In other words, while the book brings together the methodological concepts shared by social scientists, its format enables a highly individualized reading. You may choose to stay in your comfort zone to consolidate your prior knowledge or, alternatively, to discover new concepts and methods that may be of interest for your research.

In sum, this is a student-focused, comprehensive, and compact volume that offers practical information on research in the social sciences from a wide variety of disciplines and theoretical viewpoints. We hope that you will navigate through the book in creative ways and gain practical advice on how you could conduct your own research.

FIGURE 1 Network of contributions linked by cross-references