



# **Social Science Research in New Zealand**

An Introduction

Edited by Martin Tolich and Carl Davidson

The definitive introduction for students and practitioners undertaking social research in New Zealand.

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How do we make sense of Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse and changing society? This book introduces readers to the range of theories, approaches and techniques that we will need to understand this country in the twenty-first century.

Part one, 'the big picture', looks at how different cultures gather knowledge, introducing readers to science, social science, Māori approaches, cross-cultural and feminist research, and ethics. Part two, 'the basics of social science research', explains how to do a literature review, design a research project, collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data, and write up the results. In part three, 'techniques of social research', a number of prominent New Zealand social scientists show how research really gets done by explaining the use of key techniques in their own research projects, from official statistics and longitudinal research to focus groups and ethnography.

This is a book for New Zealand students and practitioners written by New Zealand social scientists, highlighting what is different about doing research in this country in the twenty-first century. The book is as much about qualitative approaches as quantitative ones and introduces readers to the practice of research through real cases, rather than just theory. The editors are fierce methodological pluralists, and they introduce the wide range of tools and approaches available to the modern researcher.

For anyone coming to the many paths of social research for the first time, *Social Science Research in New Zealand* is the perfect introduction.

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## Introduction

This book highlights the range of research methods available to social science researchers. In the past, these methods have been loosely grouped into either *qualitative* or *quantitative* research camps. The camp metaphor is useful because once researchers enter one of these camps, they quickly realise that it has a distinct set of assumptions about what might count as useful knowledge and whose knowledge is useful. The word 'camp' also evokes a defensive stance in relation to other camps.

A novel way of thinking about these two camps is found in psychology. There, a clear distinction is made between a 'statistical life' and an 'identified life' (Thaler, 2015, p. 13). Co-editor Martin Tolich uses this distinction in his own class, where he asks his students to consider the genocide the Nazis waged against the Jews of Europe. On one hand are the bleak statistics – six million dead, of which at least one and a half million were children – and on the other hand is Anne Frank's diary, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952). The distinction mentioned above comes from asking which of these – the statistics or the personal tragedy – tells the most about the Holocaust? The twist is that it doesn't matter which feature of the Holocaust is recalled. The outcome is not as important as the fact that the difference exists. Anne Frank's diary details the *experiences* of a young Jewish girl. The statistics detail the sheer enormity of the number of people murdered. Each is persuasive, but for very different reasons.

The lesson here is that both forms of representation are legitimate and useful. Which means that researchers need to have an open mind about which kind of research approach is 'best'. Indeed, a major theme of this book is that researchers need to be familiar with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This is certainly the way that research practice is moving, and Chapter 2 outlines a strategy for using both techniques in the same project.

These mixed methods approaches do not privilege either technique; instead they give primacy to the research question, and this requires critical thinking.

A second goal of the book moves beyond an understanding of research methods to identifying how these skills can create a pathway to a career in social science research. There are many rich examples in Part III of this book, but the advice of Raewyn Good (1952–2008) for beginning researchers is a useful primer. The key here is to think about how you *activate* research insights to make them useful. This is about much more than just being able to apply the techniques of research investigation well. Instead, you need to think about what your research means and how its lessons can be applied.

#### Raewyn Good's Advice to Beginning Researchers

The skills people need to be employed in government departments really do depend on the position that they are actually applying for. For example, policy analysis: we're looking at critical thinking, the ability to distil a whole lot of information down into something like four pages and to lead the reader towards a conclusion that fits with their experience.

Sometimes, I think people come out of university and expect to go onto the middle rung of the ladder, but it's like any first job, there's a whole culture to learn, there's a whole skill-set to learn, and if you just think that the plumber, the electrician, the panel beater, not only does some theory training, they also do a lot of practical. It's no different for a social scientist. It may take five, ten, fifteen years post-university to learn how to write between the lines as well as to read between them.

One of the big skills that is critically important in the workplace is being able to manage your own time, change priorities and get a project from whoa to go in the time scale you agreed to do it in. Now, partly the discipline of writing essays and assignments – they are an awful pain at the time – you learn about panic and deadlines, you can't get an exemption in the government system in the same way as you can persuade your lecturer.

A policy analyst is basically a job where you have to read a lot of bits of paper, get the essence out of it, maybe down to a page of bullet points, [and] construct a couple of pages of paragraphs about it in a way that communicates it to somebody who has not read that material.

Working as an individual is really rare. While you may do particular tasks on your own, they will be part of a project that will be a contribution towards something. Most people are organised into teams with a manager. There is collegial

support, there is on-the-job mentoring, but if you write something, that doesn't automatically mean that's the version that will go to the higher-ups. It will pass through a number of hands, and as it passes through those hands, the feedback is a real learning experience. It may feel like your work is not being valued but you will learn an awful lot through that process. . . . Well, why would you expect to have a lot of autonomy when you are being paid to do a job for priorities that are associated with the money supply? It's not something where people as of right can have a nice living for doing their own priorities.

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies skills are really a distinction that is much more meaningful in a university context than a government context. In a government context we are looking at an issue or a problem. What do we need to do to fix this issue? How do we stop these people falling over the edge? Whatever skills are necessary to provide the information, to provide some recommendations and back them up are what you use. You don't sit there thinking, 'Oh that's qualitative, I can't use that, or that's quantitative.' It's not about methodology; it's not about discipline; it's about using the range of stuff that will be useful (transcribed from jimmykahuna, 2008).

#### Outline of the Book

This book is the fifth that the editors have written on social science research methods in the New Zealand context. It uses a three-part structure to make navigating the contents easier.

Part I provides the theoretical and political context for social science research. The six chapters include how social science is distinguished from science (and from other ways of knowing); how Māori approach social research; the challenge of conducting research in a bicultural country where people live in multicultural communities; and the role that gender plays in the construction of research. Part I ends with a discussion of research ethics, and the principles and practice you need to consider when designing your own research.

Part II can be thought of as the engine room of the book. These chapters cover the essential steps in any research process and the titles are self-explanatory: 'Literature Review', 'Research Design', 'Collecting and Analysing Quantitative Data', 'Collecting and Analysing Qualitative Data' and 'Writing about Your Research'. You will notice that the logic of Part II is repeated in the structure of each of the chapters in Part III.

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