



## Glossary of key terms

### **Access**

The process followed by a researcher to obtain permission from the members, to enter a field study setting and to carry out the field observation.

### **Account**

The suitable explanations a researcher must provide when seeking access to a field study setting.

### **Accretion traces**

The accumulation of sediment on a social artefact.

### **Action research**

Research aimed at helping powerless people in society to solve their problems and be empowered to fight for social justice.

### **Anonymity**

A situation where even the researcher will not know who provided which specific responses or data for a research project, e.g. an anonymous survey.

### **Applied research**

Research carried out for practical applications and problem-solving functions.

### **Archival analysis**

Research that examines collections of public and other documents or records, to study a specific topic, issue or phenomenon.

### **Archival records**

Public or private records or documents related to the phenomenon under study which can be examined as research data.

### **Authority**

Basing one's beliefs as true based on the power of the source of information.

### **Auto-ethnography**

Also known as autobiographical sociology, a process where a researcher tells personal stories about some aspects of their own life experiences.

### **Basic research**

Research carried out to discover something simply for the sake of knowledge to improve our understanding of the world, and for academic rather than commercial purposes.

### **Bibliography**

A list of all sources of information consulted for the study, some of which may not have been cited within the body of the publication.

### **Case studies**

A case study is the in-depth examination of just one or a few cases, instances or 'objects of interest' to analyse a complex, contemporary phenomenon.

### **Causality**

Examining if one variable causes changes in another, in a given phenomenon. This cause and effect link is examined using experimental research where the time order release of the two variables is controlled, to see if the cause precedes the effect.



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### **Census**

A sample that includes every member of the targeted population of the research study.

### **Closed system**

A system that is unaffected by external factors or the environment as it cannot interact or be influenced by them.

### **Cohort studies**

Examines different samples of a specific sub-population or cohort across time to examine how they may have changed during that period.

### **Columbia School**

Related to the functionalist paradigm, research under this school of thought looks at how things may be improved by looking at how and why people do things a certain way and how they work. It is also known as administrative research.

### **Common sense theories**

Theories based on what we know to be true from experience, which can be scientifically proven.

### **Concealment**

A situation where some information about the project is kept hidden from the participants or respondents.

### **Concept**

A name or label given to a specific phenomenon, which is easily recognisable and distinguishable.

### **Confederates**

A person working for or with the researcher who is instructed to act in a certain way as designed in the study to examine how participants react to it.

### **Confidentiality**

A situation where the identities of the respondents are protected and not made public by the researcher.

### **Connotation**

The implied meanings of a sign/message/text.

### **Constructionism**

The **epistemology** which assumes that there is no one absolute truth or 'reality' and that reality is socially constructed. It is most often used in qualitative research and the **interpretivist** paradigm.

### **Constructivism**

A theory about how people learn – where they ask questions and find answers via exploration and assessment of what they already know.

### **Constructs**

Since concepts are abstract and unobservable, they need to be assigned a specifically created construct for a given research project that carries a specific meaning within that context.

### **Content analysis**

A quantitative research method used to analyse the manifest content (literal meaning) of messages in a systematic and objective manner to measure and compare their various characteristics.

### **Convenience or availability sample**

A sample made up of readily available subjects used in a research study.



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### **Correlations**

Interdependence between factors within a system.

### **Cost-benefit analysis**

An analysis that explores how to reach the desired goal at the lowest cost or in the most efficient manner.

### **Covering laws**

Theories that are expected to apply or 'cover' the broadest possible number of similar issues, events or phenomena under study (generalisability) in a given research project.

### **Covert participant observation**

A field study where the members or its leaders are aware of the researcher's presence and where the researcher openly carries out the observation, note taking, interviews etc.

### **Critical theory**

Research carried out under this paradigm examines the ideologies and power relations in society or a given situation pointing out what is wrong or unfair, who benefits from the current situation and tries to make positive changes to benefit everyone – especially those who are powerless, marginalised and negatively affected. It is related to the **Frankfurt School**.

### **Cross-sectional study**

A one-off study conducted using a representative sample from the relevant population. It provides a snapshot of the present with findings that are limited in scope.

### **Cultural studies**

This perspective is also credited to the Birmingham school. It looks at 'representation' or how meanings are given to different things depicted in a text. It also looks at how the same text may be 'read' or interpreted in different ways by different people, how it works and in what contexts.

### **Curvilinear relationship**

A graph plotted between the independent and dependent variables indicates a U-shaped curve. As the value of one decreases, the value of the other also decreases to a point but thereafter, as one increases, the other also increases. This process is reversed in an inverted (upside down) U-shaped curve.

### **Debriefing**

In situations where deception or concealment has taken place in a research study, the researcher must reveal the true nature of the study at the end of the data collection.

### **Deception**

A researcher deliberately providing false information to research participants or respondents.

### **Deductive reasoning**

An approach to research where the researcher predicts a relationship between the independent and dependent variables, stating it as a hypothesis. The hypothesis is then tested to see if it is true or false. Comes under the logic of reasoning.

### **Denotation**

The literal meaning of a sign/message/ text.

### **Dependent variable**

The variable the researcher seeks to explain. These are always measured or observed – not manipulated.

### **Depth interviews**

A method of qualitative data collection used when the phenomenon under study cannot be directly observed or measured. Interviewers will ask people for their opinions, views, experiences, recollections, feelings etc. on the topic, issue or phenomenon under study.



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### **Descriptive studies**

A study where the researcher provides a description of their observations, findings, results of data analyses, what people said during interviews etc. of a phenomenon under study.

### **Discourse analysis**

A method of data analysis used to examine how a topic or subject gets 'talked about' in society and in media messages, to uncover the power relations embedded in society.

### **Dynamic equilibrium**

A system stays in balance, or equilibrium, while its various parts move or remain active (dynamic) all the time.

### **Ecological fallacy**

Making inferences about a group and applying them to all individuals belonging to that group irrespective of their individual differences. Similar to profiling or stereotyping.

### **Empiricism**

A theory that sees all knowledge as derived from sensory experience.

### **Epistemology**

A way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know or believe in.

### **Erosion traces**

Involves wear and tear and some form of reduction of a social artefact.

### **Ethnography**

A qualitative research methodology used to observe people in their natural and uncontrolled social and cultural settings.

### **Evaluation research**

Research carried out to gauge the relevance, suitability and effectiveness of a specific (public relations or other) campaign or program, being implemented. It is also known as **program evaluation**.

### **Exit strategy**

The plan set in place to leave a field study setting at the end of the data collection. This should include debriefing, if any form of deception was involved.

### **Experimental research**

A research methodology used to examine the behaviour of people in controlled settings.

### **Explanatory studies**

The researcher provides a causal explanation of 'why it is so?' or a functional explanation of 'how is it so?' for a phenomenon under study.

### **Exploratory studies**

Preliminary research that explores a relatively new or unknown topic to gain a basic understanding of it, but not to provide satisfactory answers to a research question.

### **External validity**

The generalisability of research findings to those other than the sample or population used in the study.

### **Fallacies**

Wrong assumptions made in research.

### **Field notes**

A researcher's notes on the observations made at the setting during a **field study**.

### **Field study**

A qualitative data collection method borrowed from anthropology, also known as field observation. It is carried out in the natural setting where the phenomenon takes place.



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### **Focus groups**

A qualitative data collection method using a group interview of 6-12 people to gather their opinion on a specific social/political/environmental issue.

### **Framing**

The way the messages of a discourse are regulated and controlled, that shapes how the message is interpreted.

### **Frankfurt school**

Linked to the **critical theory** paradigm and the theories of Karl Marx.

### **Functionalism**

Research carried under the functionalist paradigm examines why people behave the way they do and assumes it is because people know the consequences and uses (functions) of their behaviour or actions. It is also known as administrative research and is linked to the **Columbia School**.

### **Genre analysis**

A method of analysing texts classified according to the distinct categories or genres they belong to based on their structures and subject matter. It is a method of qualitative content analysis of the latent or hidden aspects of messages.

### **Grounded theory**

A systematic method of analysing qualitative data.

### **Hermeneutics**

The study of understanding human action and text.

### **Heuristic value**

Indicates if a theory can generate research and take our knowledge further.

### **Hypothesis**

A formal statement made about the predicted relationship between variables in a research study, which is directly tested by the researcher. Generally linked to deductive reasoning.

### **Ideographic explanations**

Only valid for a specific situation or 'case' and not generalisable to others.

### **Ideological analysis**

Ideology is a representation of a shared value or belief held by a group or society. A researcher will examine the specific beliefs or ideologies of a culture that are revealed in the signs and texts its society uses and creates.

### **Independent variable**

The variable that is systematically changed or manipulated by the researcher, which creates changes in the dependent variable. These are measured and observed or manipulated.

### **Individual fallacy**

Taking an exception to a general rule and considering it as cancelling the rule.

### **Inductive reasoning**

The researcher begins with an open mind looking at the full picture to see what is going on. It uses research questions and comes under the logic of reasoning.

### **Informants**

A person who helps a researcher in a field study by helping them gain access to the setting, introduce them to the members of the setting, answer questions the researcher may have and provide clarifications. Often it is a member of the setting.

### **Interactions**

Factors that influence each other within a system.



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### **Inter-coder reliability**

Recoding of (randomly selected) 10% of the units of analysis coded by one coder, by another in a content analysis, to examine the agreement between the two for reliability and consistency.

### **Interpretivism**

The theoretical paradigm where research seeks knowledge through the interpretation or understanding of human action, by examining how people make meanings of them.

### **Interrelationships**

Relationships between factors within a system.

### **Intertextuality**

A new text borrowing aspects from or making references to existing ones.

### **Interval level variables**

Variable categories which carry names or labels indicating some rank order, have equal distances between adjacent categories, but have no true zero.

### **Intracoder reliability**

In a content analysis when only one person carried out all the coding, 10% of the units of analysis are randomly selected and recoded by the same person at a later stage to examine the agreement between them, for reliability and consistency.

### **Intuition**

Seeing truth as obvious, self-evident or based on commonsense knowledge.

### **Life histories**

Research that examines the entire chronological life history of a person, by interviewing a few people to gain insights into the person whose life history is examined.

### **Likert scale**

Also known as the *summated ratings approach*, a Likert scale has several statements that address the concept under examination with an interval scale, prepared by the researcher. The numbers given by a respondent to each of the statements on the interval scale are added to obtain a composite score.

### **Linear relationship**

A situation where one or more of the dependent variables will change when the independent variable changes.

### **Literature review**

An examination of the existing research publications on the topic area of a new study, to discuss their theorising, research designs, data collection methods, findings, strengths, limitations and contexts as relevant to the new one. This also includes the researcher's own views and observations, and alternative explanations of the findings as to what other factors may have given rise to those findings.

### **Logical fallacy**

A researcher fails to correctly identify the relevant unit of analysis in a study, leading to confusion, inaccurate conclusions and research findings.

### **Longitudinal study**

A study that collects data from the same population (but different samples) at different points in time.

### **Mean**

Also known as the 'average', it is the median of a set of values.

### **Measurement**

The way data are collected and observations made for a given concept or variable.



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### **Measurement error**

Errors in the findings caused by the shortcomings of the research instrument used to collect the data.

### **Median**

The mid-point of a set of values, when they are arranged in ascending or descending order.

### **Methodological triangulation**

Use of several methods of data collection in the same research project to obtain several perspectives of the same phenomenon.

### **Methodologies**

The strategic plan of action, process or design used in a research study, e.g. experimental research, ethnography.

### **Methods**

The various data collection and analysis techniques, practices and procedures followed in research, e.g. survey questionnaires, focus groups.

### **Mode**

The value that occurs most often in a distribution of values for a given variable.

### **Moderator**

The person conducting a focus group.

### **Multi-method research**

Research that uses more than one paradigm, methodological tool or data collection method in the same study to obtain a more holistic view.

### **Multivariate analysis**

A study which has more than one independent variable or several dependent variables under analysis.

### **Narrative analysis**

Describes the formal narrative (story telling) structure of a message and is a form of qualitative content analysis of latent messages.

### **Needs assessment**

An analysis that identifies potential problem areas, their severity and how they may be addressed.

### **Negative relationship**

When the value of the independent variable increases, the value of the dependent variable decreases.

### **Nominal level variables**

Variable categories, which are simply given names or labels.

### **Nomothetic explanations**

Allows for generalised explanations rather than unique or idiosyncratic ones. Often used in positivist research.

### **Non-linear relationship**

A situation where no predictable pattern or relationship seems to exist between the independent and dependent variable in the phenomenon.

### **Non-participant observation**

A field study where the researcher does not take part in the activities of the setting being observed or studied.



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### **Non-probability sampling**

A sample where each member or unit in the study population does not have an equal chance of being selected.

### **Non-representative sample**

A sample that does not include cases or individuals from all subgroups of the targeted population. Findings of such as study are not generalisable to the population.

### **Non-response rate**

The percentage of the respondents that did not answer a specific question.

### **Non-scholarly sources**

Newspapers, magazines, trade journals, websites and other sources examined for suitable articles and information for a research study.

### **Normative theories**

Scholarly theories that suggest ways to improve everyday or professional practice.

### **Object**

The event, thing or phenomenon under study.

### **Objectivism**

An epistemology based on belief in the existence of an absolute or objective truth and reality.

### **Objectivity**

An objective researcher is assumed to be free of individual views, biases and prejudices during the research process.

### **Open system**

A system that responds to and is affected by external factors or its environment.

### **Operational definitions**

The procedure followed in measuring, observing or experiencing a variable or construct.

### **Ordinal level variables**

Variable categories which carry names or labels but which indicate some rank order.

### **Overt participant observation**

A field study where the members or its leaders are not aware of the researcher's purpose and the researcher carries out the field study undercover or while pretending to be doing something else.

### **Panel studies**

The same sample of subjects is studied at regular intervals to observe changes over time within the sample and subjects.

### **Paradigm**

A paradigm is a way or framework of looking at something.

### **Participant observation**

A field study where the researcher does take part in the activities of the setting being observed or studied.

### **Participatory action research (PAR)**

Action research has a problem-solving function for social justice to benefit people who are powerless or marginalised. Participatory action research involves community members as co-participants to make their own decisions and take action, to improve their own lives.

### **Pattern coding**

A method of analysing qualitative data using a systematic set of procedures to code data into named categories (groups) to discover patterns between them.



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### **Personal theories**

Personal theories are subjective, culture-bound and often privately held beliefs, developed by individuals for use in their everyday communication, e.g. superstitions, prejudices.

### **Phenomenology**

The study of how people experience the world.

### **Physical traces**

Some social artefacts are physical traces which can be erosion (reduced) or accretion (collected).

### **Polysemy**

Multiple meanings of the same message made by the 'readers' of the message or text.

### **Population**

All members of a group, case or class of subjects, variables or phenomena under study.

### **Positive relationship**

When the value of the independent variable increases, the value of the dependent variable also increases.

### **Positivism**

The theoretical paradigm that seeks to obtain knowledge by discovery. It uses the epistemology of **objectivism** and data collection via empirical observation using the five senses.

### **Postmodernism**

An artistic movement, time in history and a style of criticism since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Commonly seen in the deliberate mixing of existing texts, artistic styles, genres and media, when creating new texts.

### **Poststructuralism**

Relates to the phenomenon of a message having several different meanings for its different receivers.

### **Primary sources**

Scholarly publications written by those who conducted the research. Generally published as journal articles, books etc.

### **Probability sampling**

A sample where each member or unit in the study population has an equal chance of being selected.

### **Process evaluation**

A research method that determines if a program or campaign was implemented as designed.

### **Purposive sample**

A sample made up of cases or individuals who meet the requirements of the study's design and possess the required characteristics.

### **Qualitative**

Data that is non-numerical and embedded in their context. e.g. responses to open ended questions in a survey; opinions of people.

### **Quantitative**

Data that is numerical and can be 'counted'. E.g. responses to close-ended questions in a survey.

### **Quota sample**

A sample that selects subjects to include known or pre-determined percentages (quotas) of people from various groups, based on their actual distribution in the population.

**Random digit dialling**

When choosing a sample of telephone households to call for a research study, randomly selecting the last digits set aside for home phone numbers for a given state, city and exchange, and using random number tables to do so.

**Random error**

Errors in the findings caused by unexpected, uncontrolled and unknown factors.

**Ratio level variables**

Variable categories which carry names or labels, indicate some rank order, have equal distances between adjacent categories, and have a true zero.

**Rationale**

The researcher's explanation as to why the study is important, what purpose it serves and what will be its outcome to society or the academic field.

**Reference list**

A list of all sources of information used in writing-up the research findings and cited within the body of the publication. Listed under authors' last names in alphabetical order.

**Reliability**

The consistency of the findings when the study is repeated at different times or by different researchers, using the same methods and procedures.

**Representative sample**

A sample that includes cases or individuals from all subgroups of the targeted population.

**Research case study**

A report of a research study, based on actual research and written in the style of a standard research report.

**Research questions**

Used when the researcher is not sure what to look for. It indicates the general areas of the phenomenon under study. Data is then collected to examine the research questions. Generally linked to inductive reasoning.

**Response rate**

The percentage of the sample that returned the completed surveys.

**Sample**

A selected number of individual cases or research subjects, drawn from a larger population for a specific study.

**Sampling error**

Errors in the findings caused by differences between the sample and the targeted population.

**Sampling frame**

A complete list of all members of the target population.

**Scholarly theories**

Social scientific theories developed using scholarly research, systematic observation, inquiry, analysis, generalisation, and prediction.

**Science**

Knowledge based on objective principles and systematic observation.

**Scope**

Indicates how comprehensive, inclusive or general a theory is to explain a range of situations rather than just one.



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### **Screener questions**

The set of questions used when selecting suitable participants for a focus group, based on the requirements of the research design.

### **Secondary sources**

Summaries of existing research, literature reviews, analyses, commentaries, opinions, textbooks etc written by those who did not carry out the original research. Helps identify the key research studies, theories and scholars in the area.

### **Self-reflexivity**

Looking at ourselves through other people's eyes, as when looking through a mirror.

### **Semantic differential scales**

Also known as the bipolar ratings system, it is used to measure respondents' attitudes towards a given issue, on a 1–7 interval scale with several opinions set up at extreme ends (e.g. useful–useless). A composite score is calculated for each respondent for this scale.

### **Semiotic analysis**

A method textual analysis or qualitative content analysis of latent messages, where the researcher looks for a 'deeper meaning' in texts, by examining the relationships between signs (signifier) and meanings (signified) and the use of binary oppositions (good vs bad) to create specific meanings. It is also known as structural analysis.

### **Simple random sampling**

A sample where each subject in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the study.

### **Snowball sample**

Also known as referrals, the sample is made up of referrals from subjects who identified other suitable subjects, usually in areas that are difficult to conduct research in.

### **Social artefacts**

A product of people and their activities or behaviours. They can serve as a unit of analysis.

### **SPSS**

'Statistical package for the Social Sciences': the computer software commonly used in the quantitative analysis of data.

### **Stimulus materials**

Audio-visual materials related to the research topic shown to a focus group before the discussion begins, to provide a common ground to initiate the discussions.

### **Subject**

The person or researcher carrying out the act of meaning-making.

### **Subjectivism**

This epistemology sees meaning-making as carried out exclusively by the active subject (person) about a passive object (what is made meaning of). The subject will import meaning on the object from elsewhere.

### **Survey questionnaire**

A method of collecting data or information from people about their demographic characteristics, opinions, choices, preferences, attitudes, beliefs, motivations etc to answer the question 'What do people think, do or feel about a specific issue or topic?'. They collect quantitative data from closed-ended questions and qualitative data using open-ended questions (by picking the applicable response).

### **Symbolic interactionism**

The study of structure, functions and meanings of symbol systems (such as language). Developed by the Chicago school. Uses the methodologies of **ethnography** and **grounded theory**.



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### **Synergies**

Factors working together indicating that the 'system' or 'whole' is greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Systems of logic**

**Deductive** and **inductive** systems of logic in scientific reasoning are used in research studies when examining an unknown phenomenon.

### **Systems theory**

The theoretical paradigm that sees an individual, group, organisation, society or any social entity as an 'organism' made of a system of parts making up a 'whole' that tries to maintain a state of equilibrium or balance.

### **Teaching case study**

A report of a research study which may be based on an actual case study but may contain some fictional or semi-fictional aspects and is written as a story. It could also be a completely fictional one.

### **Tenacity**

Long-held, taken-for-granted beliefs, which are difficult to change even when faced with contradictory evidence.

### **Textual analysis**

A qualitative research method used to analyse the latent content (implied or hidden meaning) of messages.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Provides a context to a specific research study.

### **Theory**

A theory is used to explain what happens in society and what we do in practice. It describes, explains and predicts a phenomenon in order to help us understand it and thereby provide insights as to how it may be controlled.

### **Trend studies**

A topic is re-examined or re-studied at different points in time using different samples of the same populations to observe if any trends exist.

### **Unit of analysis**

The unit of observation can be an object, event, individual, group, organisation, or society. It is the 'who' or 'what' the researcher wants to explore, describe, explain or understand.

### **Universe**

Content analysis' counterpart to the target population in other research.

### **Uses and gratifications theory**

People consume media messages to obtain uses (functions) and pleasures (gratifications).

### **Validity**

The level at which the study actually measures what it was meant to measure.

### **Variable**

The observable or measurable counterpart of a construct describing how a researcher will measure the construct. It has a set of values assigned to it and can be either quantitative or qualitative.

### **Volunteer sample**

A sample made up of those responding to the researcher's call for participants.

### **Working theories**

Theories that are at an exploratory stage and still under examination.