Introduction: Understanding Social and Spatial Worlds

How do we go about the process of investigating the many topics covered in this book? This chapter provides a brief overview of how we do research about social geographies. Chapter 2 introduced theories in social geography, or the ‘thinking’, and this chapter turns to the ‘doing’. But theory and methodology should not be seen as separate activities as they are closely connected. The Brazilian educator, researcher and philosopher Paulo Freire (1972) used the Greek term, *praxis*; this means that thinking and doing are activities of equivalent value that are not only inter-reliant in the research but take place at the same time. And, as many social geographers acknowledge, feelings are also inherently bound up with the process of producing new knowledge (e.g. Askins, 2009).

Social geographers have amassed a rich and diverse toolkit of methods to choose from, as we go on to outline next. However, it would be misleading to suggest that we undertake research very differently from other areas of human geography. Human geography itself is eclectic when it comes to methodology; it is known for drawing on a range of techniques from across the social sciences, sciences, arts and humanities, often taking great delight in adapting and combining them, as well as deploying a range of more specifically geographical techniques. Nonetheless, social geographies has become one of the most methodologically diverse and innovative fields of geography. We suggest that four key features give social geographical research its overall character (you may notice that these all arise directly from our discussions in Chapter 1 about what social geographies is and how it may be characterised):
First, and fundamentally, what characterises much social geographical research is our wish to engage with people, who are the common subject of the broad span of interests covered in this book. Many of the methods that we use are therefore people-oriented and people-friendly, helping us to elicit stories, descriptions and explanations about various facets of people’s everyday social worlds.

Second, social geographic research is focused on particular features of place and space, the immediate or more distant environments in which people are located. Our methods therefore need to be up to the job of eliciting the relevant aspects of localities and environments to enable us to draw out their connections.

Third, many social geographers are also concerned with conducting research that is relevant and, in many cases, this makes a positive difference to the social issues and communities that we study. There are particular approaches and methods that tend to lend themselves to these goals.

Fourth, practices around ethics and positionality, developed in response to critiques of traditional modes of geographical knowledge production, tend to be more prominent in social geographers’ methodological practice than in many parts of the discipline.

Rather than write a how-to guide for doing fieldwork (as there are other textbooks that do this well, some of which are referenced at the end of this chapter), we offer a broad picture of the issues involved in researching social geography. First, we outline the range of data and methods commonly used by social geographers. Second, we reflect on broader approaches to research: issues of epistemology and ontology, as well as politics, ethics and emotions. Third, we reflect on two examples from our own research on domestic abuse and ethnic minority youth, discussing the data available to us, the particular issues raised in researching these topics and the methodologies that we have designed for fieldwork. Fourth, we consider the whole process of research, including issues of analysis and meaning-making, and, finally, we
summarise the debates around the purposes of research that have been especially vigorous in social geographies.

Data and Methods in Social Geographies Research

A rich and varied range of methods has been developed and used, modified and mixed with others, evaluated and studied in their own right, resulting in social geographies being an exciting field in which to do research. Today, it is full of creative and experimental methods, as well as more conventional ways of finding out about the world. As you will no doubt be told numerous times as you begin to conduct your own research, the key deciding factor when it comes to designing your research is that the methodology must be appropriate to your research questions and be able to answer them. When thinking about data collection, we then ask what data are already available that might be appropriate and what data can we create. A first key distinction between methods is whether you want to use them to collect quantitative or qualitative data. This will depend on whether you are seeking to create an extensive dataset that represents a section of the population and from which you can generalise (in which case you will probably choose quantitative methods), or whether you want to create an intensive dataset to explore in depth the mechanisms and meanings of a smaller number of cases (which suggests qualitative methods). However, ‘mixed methods’ are often used together in the same study, and there are methods that produce both types of data.

Table 3.1 lists some common types of methods in social geographies. Bear in mind as you look at these that they may overlap, be adapted or used alongside others in real-life research (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5 later in this chapter). And data can never give us a neutral lens on the world we study; they are contested and contentious, both constructing the world and being constructed by it. Chapter 30, on data, explores these tensions in detail.

Approaching Social Geographies Research
It is not surprising that so many textbooks and methods classes at university focus on methods, as these are the hands-on techniques that we use in the field: they may present risks to us and our participants; moreover, without data we have no research. However, just as important, if not more so, are our approaches to research – the wider philosophies of knowledge that underpin these methods. Here, we want to introduce you to some important terms:

Ontology: a theory or set of beliefs about the way the world is

Epistemology: a theory or set of beliefs about knowledge

Methodology: the way that research proceeds through a series of stages of methods and analysis

Method: a technique for collecting data.

Generally, a researcher’s ontological outlook influences their epistemological approach, which then shapes the design of their methodology and their choice of specific methods. And, of course, as researchers we rarely make these choices in isolation because we are situated in certain disciplinary, institutional, geographical and social contexts. In some disciplines and specific fields, there are very few competing ontologies or epistemologies and a narrow range of methods – as we mentioned above, human geography is unusually diverse. Back in the mid-twentieth century, a positivist ontology dominated social geographies, characterised by the belief that the external world has a reality that can be known objectively by researchers (Hoggart, Davies & Lees, 2002). Epistemology was based on the idea that this world is observable without bias and thus findings should be taken as factual. Most methodologies used were quantitative and extensive, with the most popular methods being mapping, statistics and surveys. Today, these methods remain very useful for answering certain research questions, but positivist assumptions have been much critiqued (see, for more detail, Chapter 20, on data).
A recent example of an approach that is now popular in social geographies is participatory action research (PAR). It is illustrative of how much has changed in the last couple of decades. PAR involves studying a problematic situation or issue in collaboration with those affected by it; people who, conventionally, are ‘researched’ reposition themselves as researchers (Kindon et al., 2007). PAR is an epistemology founded on a belief in the potential of shared expertise and the goal of collective non-hierarchical knowledge production. It is underpinned by ontologies, often (though not always) drawn from post-colonial and feminist worldviews. It therefore involves a particular methodological design, where research is planned, designed, undertaken and analysed with participants with the goal of taking action on the issue being studied in order to change it (see Cahill, 2007a). And PAR often involves the use of certain participatory methods that help to enable these principles (see Table 3.1), although more conventional methods such as surveys and interviews may also be included.

Another example is provided by non-representational approaches to social geographical research, the ontological underpinning of which is that the world is continually brought into being through actions and practices (see Chapter 2). Epistemologically, the world can only be known by attempting to access these practices, and so the methods chosen often seek to uncover bodily habits and performances (Latham, 2003).

In Indigenous research ontologies, on the other hand, the worldview of Indigenous people shapes the way that research is approached and conducted. Epistemologies focus on the ownership of knowledge and the control of research agendas and outputs by Indigenous people (Howitt & Stevens 2010; see Chapter 8 on Indigeneity).
Three other really important and inter-related aspects of doing research also come into play in the design and conduct of research, and social geographers have been especially likely to take account of these in their research practice:

- The politics of research – as is clear from the examples above, knowledge is a hotly contested domain that, for centuries, has reflected the dominant societal power relations. In Chapter 1 we described the dominance of Western (especially Anglo-American) nations in social geographic scholarship. Indigenous approaches have perhaps the greatest claim to shifting the politics of research. The memory and ongoing legacies of settler-colonialism (see Chapter 8) and the great harm done to Indigenous people in the name of research feed into decisions about who owns, controls and gets to use the data that are produced in Indigenous approaches to research (Smith, 2007). All of this, in turn, has implications for methodological design.

- Research ethics – ethical protocols are conventionally designed to protect the participants in our research from unintentional harm. Feminist methodologies have had most to say about safeguarding the welfare and rights of participants: humanising research processes rather than conducting ‘quick and dirty’ data extraction with no benefits to the researched communities (Moss, 2002). Most researchers must also work within ethics procedures at universities, however, which may run counter to feminist approaches, for example as they increasingly prioritise protecting the institution from liability if things go wrong.

- Emotions in research – emotions are a powerful force in shaping research encounters, both for the researcher and the people whom he or she is researching (see Chapter 12 on emotion). Again, feminist and (more recently) non-representational approaches have recognised that emotions come into play in all research. In PAR, emotions may
generate research topics and motivations, and mobilise for social change (Cahill, 2007b).

The Research Process: Doing Social Geography Research

Having thought carefully about epistemology, ontology, methodology, data and methods, there are a number of other important considerations when doing social geography research. Ideally, you should have a clear understanding of the relevant debates related to the specific issues in your study, as well as an appreciation of relevant concepts and social divisions. This will enable you to fine-tune your specific research problem and the questions that you will be seeking to address in your research.

Specific ethical considerations then need to be considered. Research ethics is about promoting good and minimising harm. The Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom has six principles for research ethics:

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined
- independence of research should be maintained and, where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.

All universities have specific ethical approval processes and guidance that it is important to comply with.

Part of the process of doing research (and part of your ethical review) is to think about how you will access your participants or the specific data that you require to undertake your
study. In some cases, data may be publicly available. When accessing participants, you may need to go through a gatekeeper, for example a school headteacher or community group leader. The chances are that people will want to know what your research is about, why you are doing it and what benefits may result from it.

Having negotiated access, you will then need to be able to explain your research to potential participants so that they can decide whether or not they want to participate. Informed consent is an important principle here; this is about participants consenting to participation in your research from a position of being as informed as possible about it. This means that they need to understand as much as possible about your research, questions, motivations and how you intend to use your findings. It is generally best to seek informed consent by using a consent form, and an information leaflet about your research can help to ensure full information.

The process of data collection can then begin. This often takes time, and you need to be organised in how you record data and keep track of the process that you are following. For example, this might involve labelling interview recordings, keeping track of consent forms, ordering your fieldwork notes and/or keeping in touch with participants. There will then come a point when the main data collection phase will end and you will leave ‘the field’. You can then prepare and order your data and move into a more formal phase of data analysis (although, ideally, you should have been analysing and thinking critically about your data as you collect it). If you are following a participatory approach, then these various stages might be undertaken with participants rather than on your own.

What does this last stage of analysis and meaning-making really involve? Rachel tells her students that the process of doing research is like having a baby. Before your first go, there is a period of time leading up to it during which you are encouraged to get as much
training as possible, with plenty of books and websites to refer to prepare for the event itself. But, once the data have been collected (or the baby has been delivered) and all the fuss has died down, you are left with an equally important job to do, and there is often relatively little information to guide you.

Data analysis is often thought of as tedious, but this is a key stage of research when the findings take shape and interpretations are made. In contrast to positivist ontologies, most social geographers nowadays view knowledge as multiple and situated (see Chapter 1) – in other words, there is no single lens on the world we study that provides a single ‘truth’ that is un tarnished by the scientific process. This is one reason why robust and rigorous systems of analysis are so important, whether you are undertaking statistical analysis or coding interview transcripts. And, as we also discussed in Chapter 1, reflecting on who you are and where you are is vital to ensuring that these analytical procedures are transparent and accountable and it is clear how your contribution to knowledge acquires its final shape. This is why social geographers place so much weight on carefully considering their positionality in relation to their participants, being reflexive about power relations in the field and analysing data (England, 1994; Nagar & Geiger, 2007).

What’s the Point? The Purposes of Researching Social Geographies

Social geographies research has tended to be more oriented than other parts of geography to making some kind of difference. This trend has grown in popularity in recent years, especially in the United Kingdom, where it is now known as ‘research impact’ since the government introduced measures to count it and distribute partial funding on that basis (Pain et al., 2011). However, social geographers have a much longer history of engaging with communities, policy-makers and other institutions and organisations outside universities, and of seeking positive changes to the many social problems that much of our research focuses on.
(see Bunge, 1971; Pain, 2003). While we do not believe that this is obligatory or appropriate for all of our research, many of the authors of the chapters in this book and in the contemporary social geographies literature cited here have this commitment at heart.

The endeavour to make a difference with research can take various forms:

*Engagement* describes interactions and collaborations between academic researchers and other organisations, whether public sector, private sector or ‘third’ (voluntary) sector, as well as with the general public. For example, geographers are increasingly using arts-based methods and/or collaborating with artists to produce exhibitions based on their research, as alternative ways to educate, inform or create debate (e.g. Dwyer, 2015).

*Policy Research* is a term used for research that seeks to engage with and influence policy-making. This may take many forms, such as critiques of specific policies, recommendations for revision to policies or suggestions for new policy formation. An example is Crawley’s (2007) research into the impact of age disputes on the welfare of separated asylum-seeking children. This research identified wide variations in practice and the use of highly problematic means of assessing age. The recommendations led to the introduction of specific guidelines and training for social workers and lawyers, and subsequently a significant reduction in the number of age disputes in the United Kingdom.

*Participatory Research*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, involves the communities or groups that are directly affected by an issue sharing control of the research process to ensure positive outcomes. For example, Askins (2018) assesses the insights and outcomes achieved by PAR on people and place published over 25 years in feminist geographies.

*Scholar-activism* is a term used when researchers and their research are actively aligned with a political cause and help to campaign for change. For example, a special issue of the journal *ACME* focuses on challenging food injustice by working beyond the dichotomy of being a
scholar or an activist (Reynolds et al., 2018); see also Figure 33.2 in Chapter 33 on academic activism in environmental justice.

As we suggested in Chapter 1, then, many social geographers are not simply interested in studying the social but in doing so in ways that are inherently social. Nonetheless, these approaches to making a difference do not always lead to improvements and sometimes have potential to do further harm (Smith, 2007). There is still a considerable way to go before our subdiscipline is routinely producing social geographic knowledges that address uneven power relations and before it fully recognises that these inequalities also inflect universities and the ways that research is arranged, as well as spaces and social forms in the wider world.

Summary

- Social geographies is one of the most methodologically diverse and innovative fields of human geography.

- Social geographers use a rich range of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection to study the relations between people and places. These choices are based on underlying ontological and epistemological approaches, which again draw on various traditions. Their deployment should be sensitive to particular research sites, contexts and sets of social relations.

- The politics, ethics and emotions of research are key issues that are often explicitly accounted for in social geographical research.

- Social geographers have also had much to say about the purpose of scholarship and knowledge production, and many of us try to do research that has a positive influence on society.
• In the chapters in this book, you will find many examples of ‘real-world research’ that show how social geographers have used methods in particular research settings. As you read, you may want to critically reflect on why they chose these methods and what their pros and cons are, remembering that there is no perfect way to design research and that our practice is also situated in and changed by the messy realities of life.

Further Reading


